COLORING IN AND OUTSIDE OF THE LINES: EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN THE US TATTOO INDUSTRY

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Introduction: Renegades of the Flesh

Nervous, overwhelmed, and excited. That is how this entire thesis project began during orientation day in my graduate program. Coincidentally, the project ends the same way. My cohort and I were advised to pick a research interest left unexplored, and to consider what we as historians could add to it. Lost in thought, I stared at my tattooed feet that peek out of my shoes, remembering the adrenaline rush I experienced walking into a tattoo shop for the first time at age twenty one. Defying my strict parents, rebelling against society's cultural constructs surrounding what a 'good' future-teacher looked like—I was bad news. I chuckled, recalling how what I perceived as monumentally deviant at the time, proved to be an experience much like those had by plenty of other women my age around the aughts. I began to wonder though, if it were so normal, so acceptable, if so many women acquired tattoos now a days, why did my heart feel as if it would burst while I entered the Lucky Rabbit tattoo shop? Why did my hands shake when I handed the owner, Dan Stewart, my idea? Why did I keep my tattoo a secret from my mother for as long as I could possibly bear to, and why did my family, friends, and coworkers look at me as though I was on the prison pipeline when I acquired my second, third, and fourth tattoos? Did other women feel this way… What about those circus women from eons ago… what about female tattoo artists?

At that moment, I suddenly realized that I did not know of any tattoo artists who were women. It occurred to me that I never considered the fact that they existed; I simply just *knew* that in order to acquire a tattoo, you had to enter a male space, interact with a male artist, and spend the rest of your life operating as an uncategorized Other—too tattooed to be feminine, not tattooed enough to be masculine. Lost in my questions, I returned home later that evening to conduct research. *Bodies of Inscription* by Margo DeMello, Margot Mifflin's *Bodies of Inversion*

and *The Blue Tattoo*, and Amelia Klem Osterud's work *The Tattooed Lady* answered, and ultimately elicited more questions from me. These works proved pivotal because they drew upon on firsthand knowledge—oral history interviews. The women artists and tattooed women interviewed across time and geographic space shared their lived experiences, and in many ways revealed to readers more about the society that critiqued them, than themselves as women. For example, tattooed performer Irene Woodward's remarks in the *New York Time*s that she felt bashful about being viewed by men in a scantily clad outfit informs us more of how society expected women to behave, dress, and speak than it does Woodward's genuine feelings (for someone bashful about showcasing her body in front of an audience, she certainly did so quite a bit). Or take Baby Boomer Era artist Debbie Lenz's recollection into account. The story of her uncle Donald exposing his sailor tattoos at family functions, and her grandmother's curt response to "put those tattoos away!" for the sake of the children informs us of how a tattoo acquired during a time of widespread patriotism in the 1940s could easily fall out of social acceptability in just over a decade.

This thesis explores such cultural shifts through the silences hidden among larger, louder narratives. Just as ink fades, the tattoo outline remains. The same could be said for the story of tattooed women and women artists in US history. While these women may appear as anomalies, oddities, and cultural outliers, they actually reflect greater cultural shifts and the spirit of the time periods they operated in in an organic way. Are female tattooed performers and women tattoo artists "renegades of the flesh," as Mifflin calls them, or are they merely everyday women trying to earn a living in a rapidly changing society that simultaneously restricted and expanded their options socially, politically, and economically? This thesis argues that these women are capable of paradoxically occupying both social spaces at once. They reflect changing gender

norms and expectations, while ushering forth that change through bold acts of cultural resistance. Some of these women were mothers with children to feed, and support as with the case of performer Artoria Gibbons, or artists Dot Brunson, and Debbie Lenz. One woman in particular, Olive Oatman, chose to take control of her narrative concerning her time as a captive among the Yavapi and Mojave once she reentered white, mainstream society as a woman with a facial tattoo. In her circumstance, failing to do so would have proved dire. On the other hand, tattoo artists like Vyvyn Lazonga and Jacci Gresham, were career women who wanted the satisfaction of controlling their own destinies without male interference through small business ownership. Ultimately, the women explored in this thesis are products, as well as producers of the culture defining their experiences over the course of the past century.

In order to properly demonstrate how women tattoo artists and performers used their agency to engage in cultural resistance, I have structured this thesis to first analyze how scholarship influenced perceptions of tattoos, and investigate the academic conversations, responses, and resulting shifts that have occurred as a response to approaches in scientism, interdisciplinary postmodernism, and feminist writing. Though agency proves cornerstone in understanding why women chose to acquire tattoos and work within the tattoo industry, scholars neglected to even consider factoring it in as an important element until quite recently. Next, I explore the social, political, and economic reasons that led working-class women during the late 1880s to appropriate Olive Oatman's captivity story as a means for earning respectable livings as tattooed performers.

The heart of, and final section of the thesis, however, lies within the oral history interviews with Baby Boomer women artists that I conducted over the course of my time in graduate school. With the financial support of the Ball State University History Department, my

professors, husband, and friends, I launched a cross-country journey that took me to Ohio, Louisiana, Tennessee, Washington, and California. I have never traveled as much in the entire span of my life, as I have in the past two years. In addition, I did not anticipate becoming a member of the tattoo community, shifting my identity from woman with tattoos to a master status as tattooed woman, and looking the way I do now. In collecting the personal experiences of women artists who blazed the trail during a time when women simply did not get tattooed, or own tattoo shops, I did not predict that I would gain parts of their grit, humor, grace, and passion embedded into my skin. Some of the women I interviewed proved initially reticent to share the darkest parts of their time breaking into the profession—some memories are better left buried than unearthed in that sense. Others expressed a deep mistrust for me the minute they heard "graduate thesis," since the relationship between tattooed individuals and academics shows signs of gross misunderstanding, and maligning. Developing a sincere friendship, and respect for these artists allowed me to create a network where oral history participants would link me to each other. For example, Jacci Gresham remained impossible to get a hold of without Vyvyn Lazonga's help. Vyvyn Lazonga would have been inaccessible without her connection to Dot Brunson. These women supported each other no matter the distance, and that connection helped their stories become heard through this thesis.

Acknowledgments

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thank you for reminding me to always keep my writing rooted in history, and for holding high expectations. Dr. Michael Doyle, thank you for forcing me out of my comfort zone, and for constantly challenging me to be a better writer. Much thanks to Lisa "BB" Hensell for looking over draft after draft of my work, for always encouraging me to keep on surviving when graduate school became difficult, and for being someone I could sit next to in class. Much gratitude to my sister Diana Harrington, who took the time out of her busy schedule as a mental health counseling graduate student to counsel me; I'm so glad you're the older sister who stirs up trouble by going to grad school. Without you, who would I compete with? Mom and Dad, thank you for the text books, and tattoo ideas. Aunt Maggie, thank you for the warm bed, nighttime pick up from San Francisco airport and the chicken marbella. A huge thank you to my husband/ travel agent Dustin Sucese. Because of you, I got to see Mt. Rainer in between tattoo interviews, feast on the finest beignets Café du Monde could offer at midnight, and discover long lost Aretha Franklin songs like "Who's Zoomin' Who?" in the middle of who-knows-where Mississippi.

My deepest gratitude goes to the women tattoo artists who supported my thesis project. Thank you to Dot Brunson for being kind enough to let me stumble through my first interview when I barely knew how to. Thank you Debbie Lenz for being a mom who bought me pizza, and for staying up until one in the morning to make sure I returned home safely. Thank you Vyvyn Lazonga for your utmost professionalism, and patience with me. Jacci Gresham—thank you leaving your treehouse in Mississippi, and driving two hours to set me straight about tattoo history. Sincere thanks for Madame Chinchilla, Mr. G, Nikki Pardella, Dana Brunson, and Josh Chatwin as well. Nervous, overwhelmed, and excited—I hope I did right by all of you.

Chapter One: A Historiography of Women and Tattoos in the US Eighteen Eighty to the Present

Scholarship has influenced perceptions of tattoos and paradoxically, has been influenced by those same perceptions as well. Just as scholars shifted or defined the narratives associated with women and tattoos, social transformations brought on by historical changes such as the Sexual Revolution have challenged long-standing beliefs and forced the examination of overlooked narratives. Essentially, scholarship concerning tattooed women evolved in three major epochs: scientism (1870-1950), an era in which historians used pseudo-scientific methods to justify the deviancy of tattoos; postmodernism (1950-1970), a period in which scholars reacted to, and deconstructed the criminal narrative affixed to tattoos through multidisciplinary forms of inquiry; and presently, a combination of feminist and oral history is leading towards the reclaiming of female tattoo narratives.

Maligning the Narrative: Using Scientism to Explain the Phenomenon of Tattoos

The subject of tattooing has interested anthropologists and psychologists alike across a period of nearly one hundred years. Cesare Lombroso, an Italian university psychology and criminal anthropology professor, utilized his research to to definitively associate tattoos with criminal behavior. In his 1876 work entitled, *The Criminal Man,* Lombroso explored the hereditary genetic traits associated with criminality that had, in his summation, visible and easily identifiable physical features. Lombroso dedicated the entirety of Chapter Three in *The Criminal Man* to the tattoo. He asserted that tattoos occurred "only among the lower classes" and believed them to be "one of the most singular characteristics of primitive men and those who still live in a state of nature." [1] Lombroso also included pseudo-scientific data that charted his

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[1]Lombroso, Cesare, Mary Gibson, and Nicole Hahn Rafter. *The Criminal Man.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 58.

findings among tattooed prostitutes, criminals and sailors. Interestingly enough, Lombroso's findings concerning tattooed individuals only included those convicted of murder, desertion, prostitution, and other miscellaneous crimes while effectively silencing the narratives of tattooed non-offenders. The exclusion of such people ultimately erases or denies their existence, thus removing them them from discussion of tattoos completely. Lombroso devotes the remainder of this chapter to the documentation, both pictorial and textual, of tattoos that "help us track individuals to criminal organizations."[2] Lombroso also demonstrated an awareness of the tattoo's increasing popularity among female circus performers, and even as a fashionable fad briefly pursued by European women during the Gilded Age. He criticized such pursuits as he revisited the criminal association with tattoos in an article published in *Popular Science Monthly* entitled, "The Savage Origin of Tattooing." Lombroso cautioned; "I have been told that the fashion of tattooing the arm exists among women of prominence in London society. The taste for this style is not a good indication of the refinement and delicacy of the English ladies."[3] Though Lombroso remained careful to distinguish between the tattoo traditions practiced by non- Europeans, his vernacular reflects androcentrism in the conclusion of his diatribe:

> After this study, it appears to me to be proved that this custom is a completely savage one, which is found only rarely among some persons who have fallen from our honest classes, and which does not prevail extensively except among criminals, with whom it has had a truly strange, almost professional diffusion […] To us they serve a psychological purpose, in enabling us to discern the obscure sides of the criminal's soul […] Hence, when the attempt is made to introduce it into the respectable world, we feel a genuine disgust, if not for those who practice it,

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[2] Lombroso, *The Criminal Man,* 60.

[3] Lombroso, Cesare. "The Savage Origin of Tattooing." *Popular Science Monthly,* Vol. 48, (1896) 793.

> for those who suggest it, and who must have something atavistic and savage in their hearts.[4]

In this way, Lombroso insisted that tattoos helped innocent and respectable people discern between fellow counterparts and dangerous degenerates who threatened their safety and the human race in its entirety. Lombroso's studies did more to generate a negative narrative associated with tattoos than to further the cause of science or the psychological understanding of criminals in general. Yet, the damaged narrative remained firmly in place for the next century until swift change ushered in by middle- and upper-class women engaged in the fashionable acquisition of newly popularized celebrity-inspired tattoos in the 1960s challenged it.

Richard S. Post, the former Professor and Director of the Institute of Police Science and Administration at Wisconsin State University, reiterated Cesare Lombroso's criminal narrative in his essay, "The Relationship of Tattoos to Personality Disorders." The purpose of the essay, according to Post, "is to show that the presence of a tattoo, or tattoos, can serve to indicate the presence of a personality disorder which could lead to, or is characterized by, behavior which deviates from contemporary social norms."[5] Just as Lombroso explored common tattoo designs found amongst criminals, Post identified three categories in which to place tattoos: mnemonic devices, erotic or decorative, and those with philosophical significance.[6] Interestingly, Post cites Haines and Huffman's study, *Tattooing Found in a Prison Environment,* for the categories which he bases his discussion. Without citation or further explanation, Post untenably notes:

> In fact a striking number of the research results in the area of

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[4] Lombroso, "The Savage Origin of Tattooing", 803.

[5] Post, Richard S., "Relationship of Tattoos to Personality Disorders", 59 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 516 (1968) 516.

[6] Post,"The Relationship of Tattoos to Personality Disorders.", 518.

> tattoos indicate that there is a high percentage of sexual abnormality connected with the practice of being tattooed. Further, the theory has been forwarded that many tattoo artists are homosexuals, latent or overt, who have chosen this occupation because it puts them in almost constant close proximity to the male body, which they can feel, stroke, and fondle without arousing suspicion.[7]

Throughout his article, Post makes other dangerously false and subjective claims when he declares tattoos that state, "I'M A REBEL", are indicative of antisocial, homosexual or a variety of other personality disorders.[8] Additionally, his use of uncertain phrasing to preface unfounded assumptions, such as "seems to", further muddies his argument and reinforces the stigmatization of individuals with tattoos. To his credit, Post stressed at the beginning of his essay that additional research is needed to validate his findings. Ultimately, Lombroso and Post's arguments fail to account for the acquisition of tattoos by non-criminals, individuals without psychological disorder, and women overall.

The glaring omission of 'regular' tattooed individuals did not go unnoticed by scholarship. In fact, the increased interest and popularization of tattoos amongst female consumers during the 1960s led many scholars to seek out new approaches in their examination of tattoos. Robert F. Edgerton and Harvey F. Dingman, a team of psychologists, are among the first scholars to direct their focus on the relationship between tattooed individuals and the broader social context rather than on the mental disorders associated with tattoos, or the internal psyche of tattooed people. By questioning motivations in their article entitled, "Tattooing and Identity," Edgerton and Dingman identified five main reason why individuals in Western culture pursue tattoos: ornamentation, eroticism, demonstration of socially valued characteristics, spiritual

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[7] Post, "The Relationship of Tattoos to Personality Disorders.", 519.

[8] Ibid., 522.

reasons and to establish identity. The last reason has altered the course of study related to body modification, and has dominated the focus of tattoo scholarship for the past twenty years. In citing identity as a core reason for tattoo acquisition, Edgerton and Dingman finally provided a space for the overlooked and purposefully silenced narratives of 'regular' tattooed people; "a tattooed person is identifying himself to himself and to others; he is communicating something about a relationship with other persons or things that he believes he possesses, or wishes to posses, or wishes others to believe he possesses."[9] In essence, Edgerton and Dingman attribute tattooed individuals with agency— a concept that sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, and feminist historians will utilize as a tool to further unearth the long-lost narratives of tattooed circus women and the long-silenced ones of female artists who used tattoos as a means of subversion. In the period of Scientism, researchers carefully selected evidence to support preformed conclusions, and the full range of people with tattoos, along with their intentions or reasons behind the acquisition of their ink remained purposefully overlooked in order to support grander assumptions about deviancy within the cultural constructs researchers of the time felt comfortable in. Though Edgerton and Dingman's study established a new and more open discussion on tattooing, it also grazed the surface of the topic and would lead to an explosion of complex theories, assertions, questions, and complications surrounding tattoos and identity. Soon, the legitimate deconstruction of tattoos, where researches consider the full range of choices and behaviors would allow for the study of agency, and the ability to examine women's choices as to why they became tattooed.

Deconstructing the Narrative: Postmodernism, Sociology, Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology

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9 Edgerton, R., and H. Dingman, "Tattooing and Identity,"*The International Journal of Social Psychiatry,* Vol. 9, Iss. 2, (1963): 45.

The decades following the 1970s represented a new frontier in the field of tattoo scholarship. After nearly a century of stagnation and the repetition of the criminal narrative, scholars boldly experimented and sought out the reasoning behind tattoo acquisition through a multidisciplinary approach. Clinton Sanders, a sociology professor, pioneered new ways to examine the phenomenon of tattoos. Sanders applied sociological principals and theories, such as symbolic interaction, in order to analyze how tattoos and their meanings are developed, negotiated and learned. In *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing,* Sanders created a prototype which future tattoo scholars would follow. His inclusion of a historical overview of tattoos ultimately provided the context desperately needed in order to understand tattoos and contributed to the legitimation of tattoos as an academic topic. Instead of limiting interviews to only criminal offenders or those with mental illness, Sanders frequented tattoo conventions and shops across the nation and conducted his research on clients and artists alike. In this way, Sanders utilized the responses of interviewees to document larger patterns, relationships and ultimately provided outsiders with the first contextualized overview of tattoo subculture. Picking up with Edgerton and Dingman's assertion that identity served as a core reason for tattoo acquisition, Sanders applied long-standing theories from prominent sociologist Erving Goffman to explore the tattoo's power to represent a sense of identity;

> Tattoos are also employed as symbolic representations of how one conceives of the self, or interests and activities that are key features of self-definition […]Tattooees consistently conceive of the tattoo as having impact on their definition of self and demonstrating to others information about unique interests and social connections. [10]

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[10] Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing, (*Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 46,51.

Though Sanders remained well-aware of the stigma surrounding tattoos and the potential to explore them through a sociological perceptive concerning primary and secondary deviancy, he purposefully avoided this in *Customizing the Body* as an attempt to further legitimate and distance the study of tattoos from the criminal narrative. While he briefly mentions that the "scientific community" and society overall define tattoos negatively, he only analyzes the adverse reaction to tattoos as one that comes from individuals who are dissatisfied with the quality of their tattoos or regretful about their location. Most importantly, Sanders asserts that the stigmatized social definition of tattooing and the negative response tattooees commonly experience when "normals" act on awareness of their stigma, leads to the formation of subcultural communities revolving around tattoos.[11] This statement revealed a crucial gap in the burgeoning contemporary field of tattoo scholarship. Confident in the tattoo's power to define an individual's sense of self, researchers now shifted their focus to exploring the unknown and largely undocumented tattoo community.

In order to explore the tattoo community, anthropologist Margo DeMello realized that sources of stigmatization, as well as legitimation, prove integral to understanding the internal and external views of the tattoo community overall. In her article entitled, "Not Just for Bikers Anymore: Popular Representations of American Tattooing," DeMello investigated how the media's treatment of tattoos legitimated their status as a field worth examining. For example, one 1989 tattoo function held in Sacramento, California labeled the event as a "Living Art Exhibition," intended to "elevate the status of tattooing to a legitimate art form."[12] According to

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[11] Sanders, *Customizing the Body:The Art and Culture of Tattooing,* 60.

[12] DeMello, "Not Just for Bikers Anymore": Popular Representations of American Tattooing. *Journal of Popular Culture,* Vol. 29, Iss. 3, (1995): 37.

DeMello, what media reports say about tattoos proves just as important as what remains unsaid when shaping narrative and creating a new 'other' binary;

> Virtually all [media articles] touch on the same themes. The first, and most important element […] deals with the question of who used to get tattoos, or what tattoos used to be […] This is a crucial element of most such articles because it serves as the foundation on which the author bases the next claim, which is that tattoo customers today are different: they are "middle-class, educated and professional, family people", "who wouldn't know a Harley from a Kawasaki" […] This approach is significant as it makes the "new tattoo generation" the only group who now wears tattoos, thus rendering all others invisible […] Bikers and their ilk are not interviewed for these pieces, and are effectively silenced through this maneuver.[13]

In turn, DeMello notes that the academic treatment of tattoos mirrors this same approach; distinctions are made between middle- and lower-class tattoo styles as an attempt to elevate the tattoo as an art form. By accepting the media's depiction of tattoos uncritically, scholars inadvertently recycle and promote the "one sided view of the community, and once again, silence those who do not fit their model." In a similar vein, Clinton Sanders referenced scholarship's power to legitimate tattoos in *Customizing the Body* when he stated, "The amount of serious, typically academic, attention devoted to an object or activity also affects its chances of artistic certification […] Universities are major sources of institutional legitimation."[14][15]

Though the middle-class appropriated tattooing and designs from the working class, they do not necessarily represent the tattoo community in its entirety. DeMello's seminal work, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*, extensively documents the

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[13] DeMello, "Not Just for Bikers Anymore," 40-41.

[14] Sanders, *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing,* 152.

[15] This cycle of influence was explored further by Mary Kosut and will be addressed in then next section of this historiography.

cultural appropriation of tattoos by the middle class and explores the fluidity of the community. In addition to the media's exposure of tattooed celebrities, DeMello references New Age movements such as self-help and Neo-Paganism as essential in dismissing the working-class association with tattoos in order to make them 'appropriate' for middle-class consumption.[16] Simply having a tattoo does not denote community membership. According to DeMello, the people who are actively marginalized, such as bikers who frequent conventions and read tattoo magazines, are the ones who truly engage in membership within the tattoo community; "[…] it involves a commitment to learning about tattoos, to meeting other people with tattoos, and to living a lifestyle in which tattoos play an important role."[17] Then again, the tattoo community itself is unregulated and not rigid since anyone can self-identify in a myriad of ways across social classes due to the intimacy and personal nature of an individual's tattoo narrative.

DeMello's discussion of the tattoo community invited further scholarship about tattoo collecting and reconsiderations of identity. Though scholars tended to avoid discussion concerning stigmas and deviancy associated with tattoos in an attempt to legitimate the topic during the 1970s-1980s, Angus D. Vail revisited deviancy with objectivity in his 1999 article entitled, "tattoos are like potato chips . . . you can't have just one: the process of becoming and being a collector." Vail credits Sanders, DeMello, and other prominent researches across the social science disciplines and identified a crucial gap from a sociological standpoint; research concerning tattoos as a master status remained absent from the discussion. Using the theoretical stages of the deviancy process (affinity, affiliation and signification), Vail thoroughly examined how one evolves from simply having a tattoo, to becoming a tattooed person.

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[16] DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community,* 1st ed. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000),144-150.

[17] DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community,* 21.

Additionally, Vail stresses the semantic importance between 'tattooed person' versus 'person having tattoos.' The first term denotes an identity constructed around tattoo collecting and an affiliation within the tattoo subculture. In order to make tattoos a part of one's master status[18], Vail asserts that one must engage in learned behaviors (i.e. the three stages of deviancy). Vail criticizes DeMello's emphasis on tattoo narratives as problematic and describes her search for personal meanings behind tattoos as, "fruitless endeavors."[19] Instead, Vail proposes that the focus should remain on how the tattoo process reflects social interaction, identity construction and identity solidification through engagement within the tattoo community at large.[20] Vail's risk in utilizing and repurposing a theory normally associated with negative behavior in order to objectively explain the process of tattoo collecting further complicated the discussion concerning tattoos and identity in a positive way. Additionally, the richness of the postmodernism perspective, as shown by Vail, allows for the integration of different methodologies and disciplines. Ultimately, the supposition that tattoo collecting is a learned and conscious process involving social interaction, negotiation and mitigation, fueled interest in reexamining past narratives within modern contexts. In this way, the discussion of tattoos as learned culture opened the discussion further to analyze neglected areas of research such as the agency of the tattooed female performer or artist.

Owning and Reshaping the Narrative: Feminist and Oral History Approaches

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[18] Master status is a sociological term that denotes the most important or central aspect of someone's identity such as race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or in this case, being tattooed.

[19] Vail, "tattoos are like potato chips… you can't just have one: the prices of becoming and being a collector," *Deviant Behavior,* Vol. 20, Iss. 3 (1999): 270.

[20] Vail, "tattoos are like potato chips… you can't just have one: the prices of becoming and being a collector," 257.

Vail's description of tattoos as a "cultural phenomenon that is rapidly losing its deviant status"[21] perfectly summarizes the state of tattoo scholarship during the late 1990s and early aughts. As tattoos permeated into mainstream music, literature, television shows, and Hollywood movies, journalists and independent scholars formed a acrimonious relationship that questioned influential and long-standing beliefs that only sociological, psychological or anthropological studies could legitimate the subject of tattoos. David Ritz's entertainment book, *Rolling Stone Tattoo Nation: portraits of Celebrity Body Art*, serves as one of the earliest and most well known examples of journalism meeting with history. Though this book does not qualify as an academic work, it offers compelling interviews and primary source images of celebrities and their tattoos. In fact, *Rolling Stone* magazine has an extensive historical relationship with tattoos, beginning with its highly controversial cover story of tattooed entertainer Janis Joplin. Joplin's candid tattoo narrative inspired thousands of American women to acquire tattoos as a way of embracing their sexuality and displaying feminine identity.[22] Ritz's inclusion of celebrity tattoo narratives documents the entertainment industry's impact on tattoo consumption during the 1990s to 2002.

Just as DeMello analyzed the influence of media in tattoo scholarship in 1999, Mary Kosut revisited and updated the topic in 2006 article entitled, "An Ironic Fad: The Commodification and Consumption of Tattoos." In her article, Kosut focuses on how the entertainment industry serves as the primary vehicle for the dissemination of popular culture. Kosut references Ritz's *Tattoo Nation*, as well as other entertainment-style tattoo books, and

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[21] Vail, "tattoos are like potato chips… you can't just have one: the prices of becoming and being a collector," 271.

[22] Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*, 3rd ed. (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2013.) 54-55.

discusses how 'mediation', the cyclical process in which tattoos are popularized or made 'cool' by celebrities or media, ultimately "play[s] a role in the mainstreaming of tattoos and the transcendence of class, race, and gender lines among a new generation of tattooees."[23] Kosut also revisits Sanders' observation that presenting tattoos as artwork helped legitimate it. In her section dedicated to exploring the word choices used by writers when describing tattoo culture, Kosut found that phrases such as "long-dormant art" or "canvas for adornment" help legitimate the tattoo's position in society as a substantial art form.

The largest lapse in tattoo scholarship concerns women. Though DeMello, Sanders and Kosut briefly discussed women in their works, journalism professor Margot Mifflin trail-blazed the first extensive investigative history of women and tattoos. In her seminal work, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*, Mifflin asserts that women utilized tattoos as a means of subversion over the course of the twentieth century. She examines the historical aspects of women and the tattoo industry through various eras that correlate with larger historical events such as the World War II and the Sexual Revolution. Mifflin expands upon Edgerton and Dingman's concept of agency and uses it as a larger theme in her exploration of female circus and dime museum performers, artists and clients. For example, Mifflin asserts that tattooed ladies often moonlighted as artists alongside their husbands during circus off-seasons in order to reduce competition from rival male artists and to keep business streamlined in a factory-like way.[24] Mifflin also included the personal narratives of legendary, and long-neglected, female artists. In doing so, Mifflin documented their experiences of battling sexism in a closed off, male-dominated industry and their creation of new styles that catered to female clientele.

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[23] Kosut, "An Ironic Fad: The Commodification and Consumption of Tattoos," *Journal of Popular Culture,* (2006): 1043.

[24] Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*, 30.

Finally, Mifflin's newest edition of *Bodies of Subversion* includes an analysis of the media's influence on tattoo trends in the present day. *Bodies of Subversion* breaks ground in that it remains one of the first comprehensive texts that discusses how women use tattoos as a form of identity creation, or in many cases re-creation, and as a response to the social restrictions they face in personal, as well as public ways. Mifflin also set a precedent in her examination of Olive Oatman's captivity narrative. Traditionally, historians have described Oatman's tattoo as one forced upon her by the Mojave people with whom she lived after her capture and trade by the Yavapi in 1850.[25] In *The Blue Tattoo: the Life of Olive Oatman*, Mifflin revisits Oatman's narrative objectively and includes the long-ignored Mojave perspective in order to reconstruct missing gaps in knowledge. Ultimately, Mifflin's investigation acknowledged the strong possibility that Oatman assimilated by choice when she received her tattoo, and withheld the intimate details of her life with the Mojave as an act of self protection while reintegrating back into the hostile white society that she originated from.[26] In this way, Oatman's agency finally received the recognition it deserved.

Mifflin's work, though pivotal, received criticism from other tattoo scholars. Christine Braunberger questions the romanticization of tattooed women and the 'revolutionary' narrative aesthetic modern-day feminists affix to them in her article, "Revolting Bodies: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women." Braunberger asserts that modern feminist discourse promotes a "culture of smothering inscriptions" in which outsiders attempt to ascribe meanings to women's tattoos without considering what they truly represent to the women who bear them.[27]

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[25] Mifflin, Margot. *The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) 9.

[26] Mifflin, *The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman*, 149.

[27] Braunberger, Christine. "Revolting Bodies: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women," *NWSA Journal* 12, no. 2 (2000), 2.

Braunberger also seeks to add substantial historical evidence and to apply a more rigorous theoretical analysis to the discussion created by Mifflin's *Bodies of Subversion*. She asserts that Mifflin's correlation between female tattoo acquisition and broader historical events is "anecdotal evidence" that remains unconvincing and overlooks other contributing factors such as the "colonialist-driven appeal of primitivism in the 1880s."[28] Ultimately, Braunberger's article serves as a cautionary reminder for tattoo scholars to remain cognizant of their own theoretical outlooks since they impact the overall narrative;"[…] by speaking one's bodily ownership, tattooed women risk further reinscription by the Others."[29]

The Tattooed Lady, published in 2014 by academic librarian Amelia Klem Osterud, sets the stage for tattoo scholarship that takes recent concerns and scholarly works into consideration. Osterud's text offers an insightful and thorough examination of the historical legacy created by tattooed ladies who performed in circuses and dime museums. Osterud's collection of oral histories, photographs and news articles, provides a rich backdrop that scholarship overlooks due to the ever-present preoccupation with theoretical applications. In fact, Osterud echoes Braunberger's concerns with theoretical objectivity when she states:"It's easy to view this group of women through the lens of current feminist thought, but there's no need to and doing so misrepresents what these women were doing."[30] Osterud not only references *Bodies of Subversion* in her examination of how tattooed women deliberately chose their careers in order to support themselves and their loved ones, but also investigates how the public's fascination with their fictionalized stage personas shaped perceptions of tattoos, working women and even

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[28] Braunberger,"Revolting Bodies: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women," 3.

[29] Ibid., 20.

[30] Osterud, Amelia Klem. *The Tattooed Lady*, (Maryland: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2014,) 119.

American culture overall. This is significant since it creates a space in American history for tattooed women, rather than forcefully inserting them into already existing narratives or events.

The Future of Tattoo Scholarship

Tattoo discourse has evolved substantially since the Gilded Age. Though difficult to shake off, the criminal narrative created by Cesare Lombroso and reinforced by Richard Post failed to endure once sociologists and anthropologists like Clinton Sanders and Margo DeMello challenged it. Pop culture and media-driven discourse ultimately contributed to the inclusion of feminist and oral historical perspectives from individuals in the field of journalism such as David Ritz and Margot Mifflin. The challenges of maintaining objectivity and awareness within modern contextual applications still plague tattoo scholarship and will likely continue to do so as the subject evolves. Ultimately, Amelia Klem Osterud's assertion that tattooed women have their own place in American history reflects the trajectory of contemporary tattoo scholarship. Rather than attempting to align historical events with tattooed women, historians now work towards revisiting and refining long-lost narratives within their own historical contexts. Arguably, oral history remains of great import in the attempt to reclaim the narratives of historically significant tattooed women. For example, a book on the historical legacy of Charles 'Red" and Artoria Gibbs appears in progress by their daughter Charlene Anne Gibbons.[31] While Ms. Gibbons has no scholarly background in history, her contributions to the field will undoubtedly create new discussions. Additionally, the narratives of female tattoo artists still remain largely unexplored. Though Margot Mifflin discusses notable professionals such Vyvyn Lazonga and Jacci Gresham, there exists many unheard female artists who are well known in

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[31] Charlene Gibbons is the daughter of one of the most famous tattooed performers in US history, Artoria Gibbons and widely-respected tattoo artist, Charles Red Gibbons.

their local community, but not necessarily on a national scale. If scholars aspire to craft a deep and richly understood history of women and tattoos in the United States, it proves essential to locate these artists and document their stories before doing so becomes even more difficult, or nearly impossible. Inviting the depth this type of information provides will surly ignite further interest in preserving, as well as exposing, a truly colorful and permanent part of our nation's cultural history.

Chapter Two: When Spectacles Became Respectable Eighteen Eighty to Nineteen Fifty Five

The relationship between tattoos and western women is a tempestuous one that evokes a wide variety of reactions, perceptions and images. Whether or not tattoos represent the mark of deviancy, victimization or personal identity, one fact is clear: the history of women and tattoos in the US remains replete with instances of self-invention and appropriation among the working class. When covered in public, tattooed circus and dime show women walked among others unnoticed as a part of mainstream society. Underneath the carefully placed layers of attire, these same women made their living being noticed as a member of the outer fringe of society. Though they appear to be in full rebellion, working-class women who performed as tattooed ladies carefully crafted their stage personas to lure in audiences while still maintaining the ability to operate in mainstream society as visually unremarkable women and as a way to earn an income unavailable to them in ordinary professions.

The evolution of the tattooed woman's narrative shifted in correlation with major changes in gender roles between the 1880s and 1950s and reflect significant cultural changes in perceptions about women. Initially, tattooed women adopted the persona of the forcibly tattooed captive. At the turn of the century, this Victorian victim narrative transitioned into a

dramatic, yet more believable one that included tragic stories of forced tattooing by jealous male lovers, as well as overprotective fathers. As the boundaries of respectability and proper behavior for women shifted by the 1930s, tattooed women no longer felt constricted by the need to falsify their narratives as a way to excuse their transgressive appearance; they candidly asserted their desire to make a decent living.

Deviant Roots: Working Class Women, Career Options and Working Conditions at the Turn of the Century

Women during the Victorian period faced restrictions in both their personal and public life. Newly formed magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* encouraged women to be chaste, demure and focused solely on their roles as wives and mothers. Maintaining a "virtuous, sexless womanhood" signified a sign of higher status, as did relegating oneself to the home while allowing men to fulfill their role in society as breadwinners.[32] Unfortunately, women of the working class, could not afford the luxury of such a lifestyle. Life for underprivileged women at the turn of the twentieth century was filled with constant work, worry and ceaseless toil with little gain. Though women had a variety of careers to choose from, these options kept them under the thumb of their employers, both male and female. For example, upper-class women "relied on maids, seamstresses, laundresses, nannies, and cooks in their domestic lives and on sharecroppers, factory operatives, and working-class housewives" in order to enjoy the amenities that came with their social standing.[33] With this in mind, the opportunities for

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[32] Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates and Heroines* (New York: William Morrow, 2003) 85-86

[33] Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon, and Susan Reverby, eds., A*merica's Working Women* (New York and London: W.W. Norton Company, 1995), 84.

advancement socially or economically remained few and far between for working-class and rural women since society was structured around keeping them subordinated.

Between the 1880s and 1920s, women sought to organize in order to ensure safer working conditions, increased pay, and suffrage. This process however, was slow, difficult, and oftentimes yielded little, if any fruit at all. To further complicate matters, employers frowned upon women who organized and regularly blacklisted them, virtually obliterating their already dismal career prospects.[34]

As a response to such economic strife, some women unsurprisingly turned to what society considered at the time deviant, in order to survive. Aside from theft, prostitution prevailed as the the most common alternative career during the time period. According to reformer William Sanger, prostitution did not reflect a lack of morals, but instead highlighted the corruption of society. In his 1858 report, Sanger discovered that 525 of the women he interviewed at Blackwell's Island Women's Prison in New York City turned to prostitution because they were destitute, while another 258 were "seduced and abandoned."[35] Furthermore, Sanger revealed the dismal options for working-class women when he asserted: "apart from the low rate of wages paid to women, thus causing destitution which forces them to vice, the associations of most of the few trades they are in the habit of pursuing are prejudicial to virtue."[36] Along with the miserable working conditions and meager pay of 'respectable' labor, working-class women often turned to deviant behavior when stonewalled by society's

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[34]Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates and Heroines* (New York: William Morrow, 2003,) 162.

[35] Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon, and Susan Reverby, eds., A*merica's Working Women,* 112.

[36] William Sanger, "A History of Prostitution" in *America's Working Women,* eds. Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon, and Susan Reverby (New York and London: W.W. Norton Company, 1995),115.

limitations. Women also looked for ways to bypass the slow progress of union organization or pushes for suffrage in a subversive manner, without completely straying from their morals. If working-class women desired autonomy through the freedom of livable wages and if they sought a way to walk the line between respectability and ill repute, they needed to look no further than a newspaper to find inspiration.

Victorian Victims: The Emergence of the Tattooed Lady

During the eighteenth century, exploration, colonialism and missionary activity along the Pacific Islands kindled a rapid exchange of cultural traditions. The islanders' tattoos, which carried deeply symbolic representations of protection, status and spirituality, fascinated Captain James Cook and his crew of sailors.[37] Many of these sailors returned to the United States and Europe with first-hand knowledge in the art of tattooing and cultural dissemination took on a life of its own as westerners tattooed designs important or significant in their culture (e.g: Christian imagery, depictions of royalty and weapons). A minority of western men maintained the subcultural practice of tattooing until female circus and dime museum performers adopted the practice during the Gilded Age.[38]

Thirty years before tattooed women exploded on the sideshow and dime museum circuit scene, a young, white woman made national headlines with her unusual appearance and frightening story. During her family's westward emigration along the Santa Fe Trail in 1851, the Yavapi took thirteen-year-old Olive Oatman, along with her seven year old sister Mary Ann, captive. The Oatman girls lived with the Yavapi until they were traded to the Mojave with whom

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[37]DeMello, Margo. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. 1st ed. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000,) 13.

[38] DeMello, Margo. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community,* 13.

they lived with until Mary Ann's death and Olive's subsequent 'rescue' in February 22, 1856.[39] Olive's story, like those of countless other white women taken captive, had potential to become lost in history as another obscure and long-forgotten cautionary tale of the perils involved in westward travel. Olive Oatman's facial tattoo dispelled any chance of forgetting her and complicated her public identity within mainstream society. According to Amelia Klem Osterud, Oatman's story parted with traditional captivity narratives and Victorian gender norms since she didn't "wither and die" due to her experience.[40] Oatman deliberately reconciled her identity as an adopted Mojave with her new one as a marked white woman (Figure 1).

Upon Oatman's delivery to Fort Yuma, she was briefly interviewed by Commander Burke and soon news outlets began to take interest in her remarkable story. Early newspaper interviews with Oatman not only reveal public awe and horror with her situation, but also document her initial narrative, which her literary manager, Reverend R.B. Stratton, subsequently altered. For example, in the April 16, 1865 issue of the *Los Angeles Star,* the author assured the public that "this account was obtained only by asking questions, as her timidity and want of confidence prevented her from giving the details unassisted. Her faculties have been somewhat impaired by her way of life."[41] Oatman had reason to feel nervousness or caution in regard to revealing her personal experiences. The permanently inked mark on her chin, a symbol of

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[39] "Olive Oatman, The Apache Captive," *Los Angeles Star,* April 19, 1856, accessed February 20, 2016, http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=LASTAR18560419.2.2&srpos=6&e=-------en--20-LASTAR-1--txt-txIN-olive+oatman-------1

[40] Osterud, Amelia Klem. *The Tattooed Lady* (Maryland: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2014) 58.

[41] "Olive Oatman, The Apache Captive," *Los Angeles Star,* April 19, 1856,http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=LASTAR18560419.2.2&srpos=6&e=-------en--20-LASTAR-1--txt-txIN-olive+oatman-------1 (accessed February 20, 2016)

recognition and acceptance of the Mojave way of life, served as a magnet for hostility and suspicion in mainstream American society. That veiled hostility is noted later in the same article;

> Olive is rather a pretty girl, with a skin as fair as most persons who have crossed the plains. Her face is disfigured by tatooed [sic] lines on the chin, a line running obliquely and perpendicularly from her mouth. Her arms were also marked in a similar manner by one straight line on each. The operation consisted in puncturing the skin and rubbing a dye or pulverized charcoal into the wounds.[42]

This word choice reveals not how Oatman viewed herself, but rather the perception of outsiders. In this way, labeling Oatman's tattoo as a disfigurement evidences the public's strong association between tattoos and lack of civility. Oatman's silence and failure to provide additional details about her choice, or lack thereof, in acquiring her tattoo offers insight as well. As the object of direct and critical gaze from the moment she stepped into Fort Yuma fully exposed, save for a bark skirt around her waist, Olive's situation was precarious. The straight lines of her tattoos indicated willingness, especially considering how painful and time consuming the process was, and do not reflect resistance or physical struggle. Olive's bond with her adopted Mojave family is also referenced in the same *Los Angeles Star* interview; "She speaks of the Chief's wife in terms of warmest gratitude."[43] Olive's fond remembrance of her adopted Mojave family, as noted throughout the article, and the straight lines of her facial tattoos suggest that she acculturated and likely did not expect to live among whites ever again. Additionally, the article notes Oatman's remarkable ability to still recall how to "converse with propriety" but also notes that she behaves as though "under strong constraint."[44] Undoubtedly, Oatman

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[42] "Olive Oatman, The Apache Captive," *Los Angeles Star*

[43] "Olive Oatman, The Apache Captive," *Los Angeles Star,* April 19, 1856, http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=LASTAR18560419.2.2&srpos=6&e=-------en--20-LASTAR-1--txt-txIN-olive+oatman-------1 (accessed February 20, 2016)

[44] "Olive Oatman, The Apache Captive," *Los Angeles Star*

experienced emotional turmoil internally as she navigated her reentrance into white society and strove to reconcile her private identity as a transcultural white-Mojave woman, with her unexpected and rapidly expanding public image as a 'proper' white one.

Olive Oatman's most easily recognizable and unintentionally influential public narrative was crafted by her ghostwriter Reverend R.B. Stratton. In the book entitled, *Captivity of the Oatman Girls: Being an Interesting Narrative of Life Among the Apache and Mohave Indians* (1865) Oatman's story was sensationalized and heavily altered by Stratton. Narratives shifted to indicate that Olive was held as a slave by the Mojave, rather than as an adopted member. The book sold 1,200 copies in the first week, an astonishingly high number for the time period. It included twelve engravings and was printed in three editions.[45] In order to promote *Captivity of the Oatman Girls,* Olive joined Stratton on the lecture circuit, traveling to churches and schools. In doing so, Oatman became the first American tattooed woman to display herself publicly. Paradoxically, Olive's tattoo was not the only transgressive aspect of her story. In fact, the act of her speaking publicly for profit, and later without Stratton as a headliner, challenged social mores concerning respectable public behavior for women. Oatman excused this transgression in the opening statement of one of her lectures when she stated,

> Ladies and Gentleman, I appear before you at this time, not as a public lecturer but as a Narrator of events…. Neither the position of public speaking nor the facts that I am about to relate are in harmony with my own feelings, for my nature intuitively shrinks from both. But I yeald [sic] to what I conceive to be the opening of produce & the sterne [sic] voice of duty.[46]

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[45] "Thrilling Narrative! Captivity and Rescue of Olive Oatman," *Sacramento Daily Union,* April 14, 1857, accessed February 20, 2016,http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=SDU18570414.2.17.3&srpos=32&e=-------en--20--21--txt-txIN-olive+oatman-------1

[46] Oatman, Olive "A Narrative." Photocopy of Olive Oatman's undated, handwritten lecture notes.Center for Archival Collections, Jerome Library, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio.

Olive's decision to sensationalize her narrative for profit and to exclude intimate aspects of it for self-protection demonstrate an astute awareness of her predicament. With dismal marital prospects due to her appearance and questionable purity due to her past life among 'savages',. Oatman ultimately found marital happiness with a cattle rancher named John Fairchild, either through her subterfuge or his tolerance, and faded into obscurity after relocating to Texas and adopting a child.[47] Oatman's mixture of bold truth, and withholding of intimate details ultimately secured her future in an intolerant, homogenous society. Since society would not have tolerated Oatman's choice to assimilate into Mojave culture, or even accept her as a transcultural individual, she purposefully recast herself as a victim of outside brutality. In this way, Oatman garnered more nods of sympathy and support rather than stares of disgust. Strangely enough, her story served as a the model for future working-class women to exploit through mythical and scandalously revealing narratives. Using the victim narrative allowed women such as Oatman, and the ones who copied her story, to display their bodies for profit in a way that just passed for respectable during the Victorian era.

Nearly two decades into Olive Oatman's media exposure, tattooed women emerged in dime museums and circus show acts with sensationalized background stories that echoed her own. Nora Hildebrandt, one of the first tattooed ladies to perform in the US, wildly fictionalized her past to attract audiences captivated by her scandalous outfits, as well as the sexual undertones of her forced tattooing by 'red skins'.[48] (Figure 2) In a pamphlet published around 1882, Hildebrandt's outlandish backstory included not only captivity among Sitting Bull's tribe, but also forced tattooing by her own father:

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[47] Margot Mifflin, *The Blue Tattoo: the Life of Olive Oatman* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009),182.

[48] Klem Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 56-57.

> One of Sitting Bull's warriors accused him of trying to poison them, and the chief told the prisoner if he would tattoo his daughter he would give him his liberty—that he must tattoo her from her toes to her head…He was compelled to work six hours a day for one year before she was recused, accomplishing three hundred and sixty five designs.[49]

In reality, Nora Hildebrandt was born into poverty under a different name in London, England, sometime in the 1850s[50] Nora likely met professional tattoo artist Martin Hildebrandt, who was often presented as her father or husband even though they did not actually marry, and allowed him to tattoo her entire body in 1882.[51] Though the process of tattooing during the time period involved crudely hand-poked images and long hours of intense pain, Nora Hildebrandt's reward for becoming a self-made 'freak' was not kept secret. She enjoyed an exceptional amount of privilege as a tattooed lady. For example, the *New York Clipper* reported in March 22, 1884 that during her visit to Mexico, she received

> the LARGEST AND MOST COSTLY PRESENTS EVER KNOWN [sic]…Among the presents may be mentioned a HANDSOME MUSTANG MENAGE PONY, SADDLE AND BRIDLE FROM PRESIDENT GONZALEZ, AND FROM HIS SON A PRECIOUS PAIR OF SOLITAIRE EARDROPS [sic].[52]

On the other hand, the media did not always behave kindly toward Hildebrandt. In a scathing 1882 review, the *New York Times* lambasted Nora's stout stature and masculine facial features; "her face is [so] hard that you wonder they ever got the the needle through the skin without a

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[49] Robert Bogdan Private Collection

[50] Klem Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady,* 42.

[51] Ibid.

[52] "Circus, Minstrel and Variety Gossip," *New York Clipper,* March 22, 1884, accessed February 20, 2016, http://idnc.library.illinois.edu/cgi-bin/illinois?a=d&d=NYC18840322.2.58&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN-------#

hammer."[53] This statement reveals that no woman remained safe from oppressive societal standards of beauty. Indeed, a tattooed woman remained especially vulnerable to social commentary concerning aspects of her body outside of her control. With this in mind, how the media treated a tattooed lady ultimately determined her star's ability to rise. In turn, once tattooed women began to change their stories and use the media to their advantage, they experienced more longevity in their careers.

A Time of Transition: Tattooed Ladies at the Turn of the Century

Hildebrandt's lucrative, yet brief success was overshadowed by her younger, more attractive counterpart, Irene Woodward. In an 1882 article, the *New York Times* described Woodward, also referred to as La Belle Irene, as "a brown-haired brown-eyed maiden about 19 years of age, of medium size, and of pleasing appearance."[54] Little is known about Woodward's background. In fact, the *New York Times* claimed that

> she was the daughter of a sailor who began the tattooing when she was but 6 years of age and finished it when she was 12. She was born near Dallas, Texas, and has spent the greater part of her life in the Western wilds. She conceived the idea of exhibiting herself after seeing the tattooed Greek in Denver[55].[56]

In a far less captivating story, Samuel O'Reilly and his not yet famous apprentice, Charles Wagner, tattooed Woodward.[57] Unlike Nora Hilderbrant, Miss Creole and Miss Alawanda, Irene

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[53] "The Tattooed Woman," *The New York Times,* March 19, 1882, accessed February 20, 2016, http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9902E6DD113EE433A2575AC1A9659C94639FD7CF

[54] "The Tattooed Woman" *The New York Times.*

[55] Captain Costentenus gained recognition as one of the first male tattooed performers in America. With 833 tattoos that spanned his entire body, including his face, his narrative included captivity in Cochin, China during a military expedition.

[56] "The Tattooed Woman" *The New York Times.*

[57] Klem Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady,* 37.

Woodward did not use the captivity narrative in full. Though her tattoos were still imposed from an outside individual, the implication that her father completed them suggests that the imposition came from within Western cultural practices rather than external ones. Irene Woodward's unusually honest statement proves that her motive came from a place far deeper than her ink. She saw a male tattooed performer, the possibility of securing a living by replicating him, and reinvented herself.

Getting started in the tattoo performing business was relatively quick and easy. Circuses and dime museums always searched for new and exciting acts and even went as far as posting wanted ads in newspapers for tattooed ladies.[58] Also, acquiring tattoos proved to be an accessible, as well as affordable, investment with a massive payoff. During the late 1890s to early 1900s, tattoo artists typically charged less than a dollar for small tattoos, while a full body job totaled thirty dollars and took less than two months to complete.[59] Performing in sideshows brought in serious cash; depending on her popularity, a tattooed lady made anywhere from $100 to $200 weekly during the turn of the century. Amelia Klem Osterud further expands on the significance of this salary:

> Teachers were making an average of $7 a week in 1900, which generally included room and board; in 1909, clerical workers were only earning about $22 a week […] while the average weekly salary for a man working in a factory or some other industrial job in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was only $9.[60]

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[58] "Freak Business Good," *The Indianapolis Journal,* August 24, 1902*,* accessed February 20, 2016, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015679/1902-08-24/ed-1/seq-24/

[59] Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community.* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000) 55-59.

[60] Klem Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady,* 104.

The *Roanoke Daily* reported in 1895 that an unnamed tattooed woman, "was paid $100 a day," and,

> […]the fairy tale about her, as told by the showman, only heightened the crowd's interest and harmed nobody. She was represented in the story as having been stranded on one of the Sandwich islands, shipwrecked with her husband, who was put to death. Her life was spared, but she was put to torture, having these extraordinary characters tattooed all over her body. There from 500 to 700 people at each other the 21 daily performances at which that tattooed woman was exhibited, and all were pleased at the show, for which they paid 10 cents. "Do many of these freaks, remarkable for various reasons, get fine salaries?" "Indeed they do. [61]

This excerpt from the *Roanoke Daily* also provides insight into 'smoke and mirrors' aspect of work as a tattooed lady. Referring to this unknown tattooed woman's story as a harmless fairytale reveals an awareness that Victorians held. Many knew the falsehood of these captivity stories, yet gladly spent their money to hear them for the sake of entertainment, as well as a chance to satiate their curiosity to see the female body in an uncharacteristic form. In this way, working-class tattooed ladies knowingly tapped into a market that turned the tables on their middle-class counterparts by exploiting their gaze for sky-high prices. Other working-class women did not hesitate to justify their reasoning for becoming tattooed performers. In a revealing 1884 *Sedalia Weekly Bazoo* interview, tattooed lady Mary Baum shared a candid and similar start up story when asked where she got the idea to acquire tattoos from; "I don't know exactly," said the varicolored lady. "I saw the other tattooed ladies in museums, and thought it would be nice." [62]

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[61] "Points on Freaks," *The Roanoke Daily Times,* October 15, 1895 accessed February 20, 2016, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn95079481/1895-10-15/ed-1/seq-2/

[62] "A Tattooed Woman: A Girl Who Passed Through Tortures to Make a Curiosity of Herself," *The Sedalia Weekly Bazoo,* October 28, 1884, accessed February 20, 2016, http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90061066/1884-10-28/ed-1/seq-7/

It is important to note that while tattooed women did indeed earn substantially more than their working-class male counterparts, their salary was not necessarily steady. A tattooed woman's earnings depended on the seasons, popularity and success of the circus or dime museum she associated with, and competition from other tattooed performers. Some tattooed women expanded their reach beyond the tent and secured additional income by advertising products. For example, in an advertisement headlined: *Punctured Purity: A Wonderfully Tattooed Lady, Nature and Art Perforated— A Beauty,* Irene Woodward's name is used to sell pain-reducing St. Jacob's Oil;

> Miss Irene was tattooed by her father and underwent what was to her a period of delightful suffering for seven years. The young lady during that time suffered, of course, but were we to undergo such a delightful piece of needlework, it is needless to say that we would want in close proximity a bottle of […] St. Jacob's Oil […]I consider it as far superior to any other medicine in curative power, as Miss Woodward, from an artistic point, is above a bit of bric a brac. [63]

Whether or not Irene profited directly off of the advertisement remains unknown, however, the media exposure assisted in gaining popularity and a wider audience. Ultimately, the positive wording in the advertisement, including the mention that Irene is above using a faulty product, attempted to elevate her into a respectable status.

Unlike the ease of acquiring tattoos, gaining respectability occurred with great difficulty. The consequences of acquiring tattoos and performing in skimpy outfits weighed heavily against tattooed ladies. Woodward's appearance served as a mark of deviancy and most members of society found her exposed tattooed body repulsive outside of the high top. With this in mind, Victorians hardly viewed circuses and dime museums as beacons for good, clean family fun.

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[63] "Punctured Purity: A Wonderfully Tattooed Lady; Nature and Art Perforated- A Beauty," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* March 21, 1882, accessed February 20, 2016, https://bklyn.newspapers.com/clip/462292/irene_woodward_punctured_purity/

Nonetheless, they remained curious and captivated by Irene's tantalizing story. In order to toe the line between virtue and nonconformity, Irene's media splash in the *New York Times* provided insight as to how both tattooed ladies and media outlets strategically crafted their image as respectable;

> Miss Woodward remarked that she felt a little bashful about being looked at that way, never having worn the costume in the presence of men before. The tattooing, which was done in India ink, appeared artistic, and the devices were carried and attractive. Around the neck was observed a floral necklace. Dependent from this was a bunch of roses in full bloom dropping until their graceful forms were lost beneath the lace edging of the bodice…the arms were covered with stars hearts, floating angels, wreaths, harps, crosses, a full-rigged ship, and various mottoes.[64]

Prefacing Irene's name with 'Miss', along with referencing her reluctance to reveal herself in front of male figures for the first time reflects the attempt to legitimize her status as a proper lady, and softens the transgressive nature of her appearance. Irene's first time occurred every time she presented her body before audiences; this served undoubtedly as a way to 'exclusivize' her display from city to city and to attract droves of spectators. The vivid descriptions of her tattoos, along with the use of the words: "bashful," "artistic," "attractive," "floral," and "graceful" as descriptors served as a way to further elevate, as well as feminize, Irene's appearance. Other performers, such as Miss Creole and Miss Alawanda, adopted similar media tools in their presentation (Figures 3 & 4). As tattooed ladies became more commonplace in circuses and dime museums, the opportunities that came with the twentieth century also forced tattooed ladies to face new challenges. In order to stay exotic within the realm of changing ideas concerning respectability, these women thought of innovative narratives to compete with each other, as well as to recapture the attention of audiences. These women shifted the Victorian

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"The Tattooed Woman" *The New York Times.*

victim narrative to one that demonstrates elements of deliberate choice in becoming a 'self-made freak'. In a greater sense, the act of exposing their bodies for pay, and even operating independently without subordinating themselves to a male boss, defied traditionally held social expectations concerning a woman's bodily autonomy.

Living Picture Galleries: Tattooed Women Own Their Narratives

In the period during and between World War I and II, sailors and other military men contributed to a resurgence in the popularity of tattoos as a way to demonstrate patriotism. Known as the Golden Age of Tattooing, this period is most recognized for its American or 'traditional' designs. Working-class men acquired tattoos of such designs from flash or pork chop sheets.[65] By the 1920s, the popularity of tattooed ladies soared. Tattooed ladies, unlike their working-class counterparts involved in unionizing to improve labor conditions or organizing to push for suffrage, traversed boundaries with greater ease and speed. Still, tattooed women could not rely on the captivity narrative since its exoticism faded once Americans settled the western portion of the United States. Americans recognized that self-made 'freaks' were exactly that—self-made. To compensate and retrofit the drama that successfully lured audiences in during the previous century, twentieth century tattooed ladies romanticized rags to riches and love stories as their driving tattoo narratives, with increasing candidness about their unique career choice.

The stage story associated with Artoria Gibbons exemplifies this shift in storyline. In truth, Artoria was born Anna Mae Burlingston to a farm couple in 1893.[66] Shortly after the

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[65] Non-customizable design sheets that promoted classic and simple tattoo ideas which were affordable.

[66] Amelia Klem, "A Life of Her Own Choosing," *Wisconsin Magazine of History,* vol. 89 (Spring 2006): 31.

family relocated from Wisconsin to Washington her father passed away and Anna left home to support herself as a domestic servant. [67] It was in Spokane where Anna met tattoo artist Charles "Red Gibbons" and they married in 1912.[68] Artoria's stage story evolved over the course of her career. It initially began as a young girl who was swept away by her love for a carnival tattoo artist seeking a stunning muse to permanently mark, and ended with a heavily fictionalized and sordid tale of jealousy as she aged. This reflected the need to still maintain the public facade of tattoos as something imposed on women by a male in order to soften the audience's apprehension. Though tattoos of bald eagles, anchors, clipper ships and U.S. flags became somewhat commonplace due to increased patriotism between 1918 and 1945, it was still considered socially unacceptable for women to acquire them.[69] According to Anna's daughter, Charlene, her mother did not acquire her tattoos until a few years after she was born; "the state of the economy at that time was in shambles, and the future looked bleak for everyone. That is what prompted this extraordinary endeavor on their parts. It was a case of survival!"[70] In fact, Artoria's tattoos helped the family continue to survive after Charles lost his vision after a brutal attack. According to Charlene, her mother never retired from the circus and was a fully paid member during her hiatus she took in order to care for her husband while he recovered.[71] Working-class women employed at a factory certainly would not receive such familial-like treatment from their management or financial compensation during a personal emergency. Yet, audiences were mystified by the romantic allure of Artoria the Tattooed Girl's

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[67] Klem, *"*A Life of Her Own Choosing," 31.

[68] Ibid.

[69] DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription,* 13.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Charlene Gibbons, email message to author, March 6, 2016.

whirlwind, and standard-defying love affair with a carnival tattoo artist rather than the reality of her situation. As an elderly tattooed lady, Artoria's ascribed narrative recalled the classic theme of victimization by brutes when circus narrator Jack Woods announced:

> …this woman is a man-made monstrosity. She was, as a young woman, very beautiful. She met and married a man three times older than herself. He was so jealous of her and afraid she would be attracted to some other man that he marked her body, thinking…she would no longer be attractive to any other men. [72]

While the audience was dizzy with anticipation by the spellbinding introduction, Anna was deeply offended by the narrative and according to her former employer, Ward Hall, she sternly reprimanded him for permitting Woods' announcement; "I am no monster, he is never to call me such a thing as a monstrosity again."[73]

Such narratives attracted audiences and reflected the ire people still felt towards tattooed ladies. Socially, they were misfits who failed to fit within commonly held images people associated with respectable women. Performing nearly nude on stage did not help the situation, nor did the erotic implications of their tattoo narratives. Albert Parry's famous 1933 text, *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art, as Practiced by the Natives of the United States,* voiced popular opinion concerning these types of women;

> There are extroverts as well as introverts among the tattooed women of America. There are, for instance, the tattooed women of the circus and the dime-museums, proud of their ornamented skin and making a profession of their exhibitionism. A feeling not of guilt but of superiority is their distinguishing trait.[74]

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[72] Klem, *"*A Life of Her Own Choosing," 37-38

[73] Ibid.

[74] Albert Parry, *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art, as Practiced by the Natives of the United States,* (New York: Collier, 1933), 9.

Contrary to Parry's belief that tattooed ladies carried an heir of superiority about their exhibitionism, Artoria's daughter, Charlene, steadfastly refutes the claim that her mother was an exhibitionist. Charlene also asserts that her mother never imagined that her career choice would impact women's history so deeply.[75] Artoria and other tattooed ladies like her were ordinary women with extraordinary careers. They came from impoverished backgrounds and desired to carve out a lucrative living while maintaining marriages, children and a measure of independence during times of economic instability. Luckily, they were able to accomplish this since most fashion during the time period exposed little skin anyways. In fact, leading a double life by choice certainly proved to be fiscally rewarding. True to their career-driven investment, these performers kept covered to not only prevent free shows, thus keeping their exoticism fresh, but to also prevent the wear and tear tattoos suffer over the course of aging and through regular sun exposure.[76] Upon further examination, it is apparent that tattooed ladies strategically placed their tattoos in such a way that allowed them to dress modestly in public and to function in their daily lives unnoticed. Photographs of popular tattooed ladies reveal that their tattoos did not extend past their forearms, above their neck or below their ankles. In addition, many of these ladies' bore tattoos that included religious and patriotic iconography. Whether this was for personal preference or as a means of self-expression is not known, however, the organization and thematic nature of these tattoos demonstrate a common pattern. Tattooed ladies used such images to elevate the status of their tattoos as a proper art form worthy of display and as a way to soften the blow of their nonconforming bodies for spectators (Figures 2-7). Even the Ringling Brothers Circus management remained cognizant of this and

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[75] Charlene Gibbons, email message to author, March 6, 2016.

[76] Klem Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady,* 66, 114, 119.

encouraged employees, particularly women, to maintain respectable behavior on and off stage to dispel stereotyping associated with their acts; "we should want the "Town folks" to feel that the "Show folks" are real men and women and ladies and gentlemen as well."[77] In this way, the image of respectability encompassed not only a tattooed woman personally, but the entire reputation of the show she worked for.

As women began to experience greater social freedom due to suffrage, the New Woman Movement and the absence of male competition in the workforce during both World Wars, the tattoo evolved into a solidified marker of working-class folk art. Undoubtedly, tattooed women still faced harsh scrutiny for their appearance. However, with their limited options taken into consideration, the pay-off was ultimately worth it and women during the time period continued to perform. Plainly put, when asked in 1931 why she acquired her tattoos, May Vandermark quipped, "I love Art…and that's true, too—up to a certain point…I mean, I like to eat regular."[78] Like Artoria Gibbons, Vandermark found that performing as a tattooed lady garnered a higher profit than working as a stenographer. According to a 1927 article in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Vandermark saw another woman with a small tattoo while swimming at Coney Island and decided she wanted one. Upon acquiring two, she met and became "great friends" with tattooed performer Lotta Pictoria "who persuaded Mae to be a professional."[79] In the same article, Lotta Pictoria is referenced as the person who introduced Vandermark to Charles Wagner and helped her gain a full body suit over the course of ten months for the bargain price of $130. This

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[77] "Suggestions and Rules for Employees, Ringling Brothers," Photocopy of employee pamphlet. Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

[78] "Art Means Grub to a Tattooed Lady," New York Post, April 7, 1931

[79] "Love Tragedy of the India-Rubber Man and the Tattooed Lady," *The Milwaukee Sentinel,* August 14, 1927, accessed February 20, 2016, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1368&dat=19270814&id=j2JQAAAAIBAJ&sjid=Xg8EAAAAIBAJ&pg=6470,2089007&hl=en

suggests that Lotta Pictoria mentored or showed Mae Vandermark the ropes of performing as a tattooed lady, shared her social connections with her and helped launched her career.

Plenty of tattooed ladies made their mark throughout this time period, however Betty Broadbent stood apart as the first tattooed lady to break the social barrier between the circus and mainstream life. Initially she performed as the youngest tattooed woman ever during the 1920s, however, by the time bathing suits and hemlines rose, Broadbent decided to shock the public when she entered a beauty pageant at the World's Fair in 1939.[80] While she had no chance of winning, Broadbent enjoyed the attention and free advertising, and assured her audiences that her wholesome act stood apart from "those carnival floozies with one or two tattoos who would bump and grind."[81] Like Mae Vandermark, Broadbent's tattoos also bore references to pop culture icons and ones suited to her individual taste; she sported images of Charlie Chaplin and Charles Lindberg (Figures 8-10). In this way, Broadbent reflects the tattoo's permanence in American folk culture as an art form steadily gaining recognition. Incidentally, Broadbent's tattoos suggest a deliberate attempt to express oneself through choice rather than imposition or affliction. Broadbent's overt challenge to traditional female behavior also substantiated her tattoo narrative. Gone were the days of having to invent a victim tale to excuse her status as a tattooed lady. In fact, her souvenir postcard bluntly dispelled any mystery surrounding her choice in getting tattooed; "It was done for professional reasons only. I have no

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[80] Mifflin, Margot. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo, (New York: Powerhouse Books, 2013), 25.*

[81] Mifflan, Margot. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo,* 25.

regrets for having chosen this most unusual career."[82] Broadbent's 1956 pay stub for $220 suggests no need for regrets.[83]

Fame Fades, Ink is Forever:

During the 1950s and 1960s, business started to lag for many artists and tattooed ladies since circus shows and dime museums fell out of vogue. As the postwar era hailed a sense of conformity and normalcy, tattoos decreased in popularity and once again became stigmatized due to their longstanding association with criminal activity. Still, a small group of tattooed women, whose youth and ink faded considerably by this time, continued to perform where an audience gathered. One of the last to perform, Artoria Gibbons performed well into her eighties during the 1980s not necessarily for money, but for the love of performance art.[84] Though not as visible or discussed as often, some tattooed ladies moonlighted as artists during their off seasons alongside their husbands. Many of these tattooed ladies learned the craft of professional tattooing from their significant others and paved the way for a new generation of women to secure their livings by creating feminine styles of flash in their own shops.

Tattooed ladies such as Maud Wagner and Stella Grassman learned from their husbands and moonlighted as artists throughout the 1920s and 1930s.[85] In doing so they helped prevent their husband's shops from facing competition in the form of male apprentices leaving to start their own businesses nearby. They also kept the family shop bustling in an assembly line fashion

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[82] Klem Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady,* 113.

[83] Photocopy of Betty Broadbent's pay stub, Dana Brunson Private Collection

[84] Charlene Gibbons, Facebook message to author, April 22, 2016.

[85] Mifflin, Margot. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (3rd ed. New York: Powerhouse Books, 2013) 31-32.

by coloring in their male counterpart's line work.[86] Mildred Hull, who gained popularity during the 1920s as a tattooed lady, achieved notoriety as a tattoo artist in her own right during the 1930s. Early rumblings about Hull's gender disruption in the tattoo industry surfaced in the December 25th, 1936 issue of *Family Circle* magazine. With a large cover feature, and extensive interview, Hull proudly declared: "No, it isn't a handicap to be a woman in the tattooing business." [87] The article, entitled "Millie: Only Lady Tattooist," neglects to mention Mildred Hull's past as a tattooed lady who performed in circuses—perhaps as a move to distance herself , and as a means to justify her respectability and professionalism as a tattoo artist in her own right—and instead references her skill as an embroider as the source of inspiration for her career shift into the tattoo industry.[88] The article does, however, shed light on the difficulties she experienced working the needle, rather than being a living canvas under it:

> "[…] You know how men are in any business. Always sort of jealous if a woman does as well as they do. Some of the men tattooists along the Bowery are now cutting prices to try to put me out of business. But I get plenty of customers just the same—fourteen or fifteen a day. I think men rather like the idea of having a woman tattoo them. They think a woman is more likely to be more careful […] I must say that not all [men] have worked against me. Some have been very nice about showing me the tricks of the trade."[89]

Though Hull's cover feature in *Family Circle* followed a similar pattern as the aforementioned newspapers in describing tattoos as art, and Hull's work as 'fancy,' or 'professional,' tattooing still remained outside of the norm for most Americans, and even more so for women outside of the

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[86] Mifflin. *Bodies of Subversion,* 30.

[87] De La Mater Scacheri, Mabel. "Millie—Only Lady Tattooist," *The Family Circle*, Vol.9, No. 26, December 25, 1936.

[88] De La Mater Scacheri, Mabel. "Millie—Only Lady Tattooist"

[89] Ibid.

working class. Unfortunately for Hull, her fame as an artist proved tragically short. Struggling to keep her shop open after a string of bad relationships with men who took advantage of her wealth, she committed suicide by poison in a tavern near her shop in 1947.[90] As the most visible tattoo artist of the time, Mildred Hull's death simultaneously marked the end and beginning of a new era for women and tattoos in the US.

Conclusion

Even though tattooed males performed on the side show circuit and in dime museums, tattooed women upstaged them easily by offering a shocking and sexualized contradiction to traditional American social norms. Contrary to the stage personas ascribed to them, tattooed female sideshow performers were in fact women exercising the choice to not follow the traditional narrative of shame and misfortune associated with captivity or victimization; these women displayed an essence of survival, perseverance and an unprecedented level of agency that afforded them opportunities. By the mid-century however, a small handful of tattooed ladies repurposed their profession as they shifted from entertainers to ink masters. In doing so, they not only kept the tattooing profession alive, but also blazed the trail for future women tattoo artists who aspired to turn the male dominated industry on its head.

Chapter Three: A Period of Contradictions Nineteen Forty Five to Nineteen Eighty

According to Ruth Rosen, the Fifties reflect a period of harsh realities set against a backdrop of hopeful ideals. [91] Young, impressionable girls watched their mothers suffer in silence

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[90] Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*, 35.

[91] Ruth Rosen. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 8.

while their lives revolved around a ceaseless, unfulfilling cycle of domestic servitude, childrearing and acquiescing. During the time period, women struggled to meet the expectations of an increasingly consumeristic and media-driven society at the expense of their own dreams while their male counterparts seemed to effortlessly reap the benefits of the G.I. Bill and a booming post-war economy. Betty Friedan's groundbreaking 1963 work, *The Feminine Mystique,* finally articulated the boredom, suffocation and misery surrounding the disappointing lives of American women. In turn, it also served as a tool for women, particularly those coming of age, to usher in a future full of endless options. However, before gaining the opportunity to explore the possibilities of breaking cultural norms, young women remained subject to contradictory advice and expectations.

Girls coming of age in the Fifties faced rigorous social protocols for dress and behavior. If publications such as *Ladies Home Journal* served as the standard bearer for information on gender roles for adult women, teens looked to The *Seventeen Book of Young Living* for quintessential information to help them navigate the "early springtime of [womanhood]".[92] In a section entitled "Buttons and Bows", *Seventeen* editor Enid A. Haupt advises young women to "never go on a date of importance without a complete dress rehearsal, including accessories" and dedicates an entire section on the value of using and caring for handbags, stockings, gloves, and handkerchiefs.[93] Haupt reminds girls that they should dress to convey their inner personality while dressing to please others—especially men; "if the most important man in your life doesn't like your new purchase, better think twice before you keep it."[94]

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[92] Enid A. Haupt. *The Seventeen Book of Young Living* (New York: Van Rees Press, 1957), ix.

[93] Haupt, *The Seventeen Book of Young Living*, 59.

[94] Ibid., 62.

Women simply could not freely wear their hair and clothing without conforming to societal norms, let alone acquire a tattoo or exude raw sexuality during the time period. To do so would mark a woman as a prostitute or as 'easy,' a member of a gang or lesbian. Tattoo artist Samuel Stewart noted that tattooing women during the Fifties came with considerable risks attached. "Too many scenes with irate husbands, furious parents, indignant boyfriends and savage lovers" forced Stewart to create restrictive loopholes and shop policies to deter female customers.[95] However, these clientele experiences did not reflect the norm. Simply put, "nice girls don't get tattoos" and the ones who did failed to ascribe to the clean cut ideal image of the American woman encouraged by outlets such as *The Seventeen Book of Young Living*.[96] Anthropologist Margot DeMello affirms that tattoo artists played a role similar to that of other men in the lives of women, and felt an obligation to keep "nice girls (i.e., attractive, middle-class, heterosexual women)" from violating cultural boundaries."[97]

Contrary to widespread belief that after WWII, women simply dropped their jobs and returned to the kitchen, many American women managed to hold onto jobs. In fact, "by 1955, more women worked in the labor force than had during World War II."[98] Gail Collins argues that while the numbers of women working appear impressive, the jobs women "were holding down were not, for the most part, careers" and that men typically refused to work such low

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[95] Samuel Steward. *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors and Street Corner Punks, 1950-1965* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1990), 71.

[96] Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, 128.

[97] Margo DeMello. *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 61.

[98] Ruth Rosen. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 19.

paying clerical jobs.[99] Many women worked to support the myth of middle class status, much to the chagrin of their husbands who wished to appear as the sole bread winner, while struggling to maintain their domestic duties without any hiccups.[100]

Despite the influx of women in the workforce, as well as universities, these areas did not exactly serve as safe spaces for women. Rosen ascertains that working women "commonly encountered predatory male supervisors and coworkers whose hands groped where they were not wanted" and that while the term sexual harassment did not exist, the action undoubtedly did. [101] As with the case of dress, *The Seventeen Book of Young Living* emphasized that college and career remained inextricably linked to a woman's identity in relation to the main man in her life. After declaring that not every girl "needs or should go to college," Haupt adds insult to injury by reminding girls that if they choose to work, then "they can help fatten the family income while their husbands attend college."[102] Passages such as these reaffirm and help disseminate the 'feminine mystique' far and wide— a woman's worth only goes so far as the man she serves.

Much like mainstream society, the tattoo industry during the Fifties reflected a similarly gendered caste system. For nearly half a century, women worked closely with men in the industry as their muses, their bodies to serve as living, breathing advertisements of their significant other's skill. As the popularity of circuses and dime shows waned, largely due to the introduction of television into North American living rooms, many tattooed ladies found their opportunities to perform dwindling as a result of technology and changing perceptions of crude

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[99] Gail Collins. *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates and Heroines* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 398.

[100] Ruth Rosen. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 21.

[101] Rosen, *The World Split Open,* 23.

[102] Haupt, *The Seventeen Book of Young Living,* 179.

versus appropriate forms of entertainment. For women, breaking into the field of tattooing proved next to impossible without the support a male and a willingness of one to accept a female apprentice. Women who did strike out on their own often found difficulty in securing clients since males comprised the majority of customers and they assumed the inferiority of female artists. To counter this, female artists often modified their names to include the initials of their first and middle names. In doing so clients could no longer write off a female artist before setting foot into her tattoo shop.[103] Then again, male clients, particularly sailors who did not have the pleasure of being in the presence of a woman in a long time, gladly sat for tattoos done by artists with a stereotypically 'gentler' touch. Nell Bowen serves as a primary example of this scenario.

More popularly known as Painless Nell, she "acquired a near monopoly on tattooing in San Diego during and after the Second World War."[104] Painless Nell practically ran a tattoo factory, employing a group of co-ed artists in five different shops.[105] Together with her husband, Hugh Bowen, and her twin sister, Painful Jo, Painless Nell preserved the bold lines and colorful designs of Golden Age Tattooing until her death in 1971.[106] Yet, despite her noteworthy accomplishments, the likelihood of baby boomer artists such as Dot Brunson, Vyvyn Lazonga or Debbie Lenz recognizing Painless Nell as a role model does not exist simply because female artists remained a microscopic minority in a sea of male artists that operated in a mostly underground countercultural industry. Tattoos simply had yet to appear on North America's cultural map, but this would soon change.

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[103] Ibid., 31.

[104] Ibid., 41.

[105] Ibid., 42.

[106] Ibid., 42.

In addition to the widespread upheaval caused by the Civil Rights Movement, Kennedy's assassination and the Vietnam War, the 1960s ushered in a wave of young feminist baby boomers edging into adulthood. Fires within women who came of age during the time period ignited as they witnessed the power of protest through television.[107] Meanwhile changing fashion, behavior, views on sex and politics highlighted the generational gap between them and their mothers. As countercultural figures permeated magazine covers, airwaves and television sets, young women looking to express themselves in unconventional ways or to secure their livelihoods without suffering the tedious labors of secretarial work did not have to look deep to find prototypes, heroines and inspiration.

Just a Little Treat for the Boys: Janis Joplin & the Feminization of Tattoos

Viewed either as counterculture's most talented example of feminine rebellion or a tragic character destroyed by hard drugs and heartache, Janis Joplin exists in popular American memory for not only her vocal abilities, but her visual appearance as well. Joplin kept no secret of her wild ways; she proudly brandished her tattooed wrist with her trademark cheeky grin for magazine covers, television shows and photographers. Whether intentional or not, Joplin's celebrity influence simultaneously reflected a change in perceptions associated with tattoos and caused it as well.

The bold, poster-girl for the hippie generation did not always exude raw sexuality through dress and behavior. In fact, Janis Joplin's upbringing and experiences in young adulthood exist as a complete and total antithesis of the celebrity image she created. Joplin entered the

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[107] Ruth Rosen. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 59

world in 1943 and grew up in a middle-class home in Port Arthur, Texas.[108] Janis's sister, Laura Joplin noted in *Love, Janis* that her sister "displayed an independence that pleased her parents when it showed her creativity and originality," while it frustrated them when she wielded it to challenge their authority. [109] Joplin's rebellious streak left her dissatisfied with the monotony of education and while she enjoyed classes where her creativity blossomed, her grades reflected otherwise.[110] In addition to academic troubles with school, the adolescent social experience wracked Janis. Long before she attempted to bring her alter ego to life by stylizing herself as 'Pearl', puberty left Joplin embarrassed of her undeveloped breasts and widespread acne.[111]

Rather than conform to the standards set by the hegemonic elites of Port Arthur, Janis resisted in any way she could; "she didn't look at the options set before her by society; she surveyed the world."[112] That meant drawing inspiration from Kerouac and the Beats, disregarding school dress code despite her mother's attempts to dress her 'nicely' and creating a she-devil attitude. In addition to thickening her skin against bullies with a rolodex of swear words, ready to rattle off when needed, Janis prepared to deal with confrontations by creating an obnoxious, loud cackle for a laugh at her friend's house.[113] Like protective armor, that laugh would later ameliorate the slight tension surrounding the discussion of her tattoos on *The Dick Cavett Show.* Janis's disregard for social mores generated chaos in her home and the

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[108] Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis* (New York, New York: Villard Books, 1992), 25.

[109] Joplin. *Love, Janis,* 29.

[110] Ibid., 41-42.

[111] Ibid., 48.

[112] Ibid., 49.

[113] Ibid., 57.

disagreements with her parents took on another dimension as they witnessed their daughter plunge into the point of no return socially with rocket speed.[114]

Somewhere, while bouncing around Austin, Texas and San Francisco, California, Janis Joplin found fame. She discovered her voice, a vehicle she used to communicate the pains of her metamorphosis from ugly duckling to "hippie pin-up girl" and "Haight princess".[115] Joplin used her image to attract fans of both sexes, to secure her fame and to bolster attention as well. Aside from peacocking in typical rockstar fashion with feathered boas in her hair and elaborate stage costumes, Joplin made her countercultural rebellion permanent with some ink. A well-renowned San Francisco artist named Lyle Tuttle completed the two tattoos sometime in 1970. Tuttle recalls the memorable experience:

> When Janis came into the shop I didn't recognize her. I knew who she was, because she had just come back from a tour in South America and there had been something in the news that I had seen. She was this groovy little hippy chick with the clothes and all these bracelets and necklaces…She wanted two tattoos. Now any smart tattoo artist should know that when a customer wants two tattoos, you always do the biggest one, first. The tattoo on her wrist was patterned after one of these bracelets that she was wearing, one that she had picked up on her tour in South America… She told me that getting a tattoo was just about the worse pain she could imagine and she wasn't going to get the second tattoo…So I told Janis to go downstairs and get a drink and come back. Anyway, she came back and I did the little heart on her breast.[116]

Undeterred by the pain, likely with the numbing help of a three week tequila binge, Joplin hosted a party in which Tuttle tattooed guests as a party favor. As Laura Joplin recalls, "there was more than one person who woke the next morning wondering how he had allowed himself to

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[114] Ibid., 70.

[115] Ibid., 191.

[116] Marisa Kakolus, "Q & A with Lyle Tuttle.," *Inked Magazine,* September 2011, accessed November 21, 2016, http://www.needlesandsins.com/2014/10/flashback-lyle-tuttle-interview.html.

be so adorned."[117] Weeks later, when Dick Cavett asked if her wrist tattoo was real, Janis lowered her voice and responded sensually: "it doesn't come off at all…I have another one too." Pressed further, Joplin recalled (with a noted sense of delicious satisfaction at the squeamishness of her captivated host and audience): "there's a great cat in San Francisco who does these named Lyle Tuttle…he's just gorgeous… I invited him to a party and he tatted eighteen people [chuckles]. It was a great party…they wanted it."[118] When pressed for more details in a *Rolling Stone* interview, Janis declared: "the one on my wrist is for everybody. The one on my tit is for me and my friends. Just a little something for the boys, like icing on the cake."[119] Just as tattooed ladies, who performed in circuses and dime shows, carefully crafted their images sixty years prior, Joplin used her tattoos to cultivate an image that combined her idealized and true self. To survive in the rock and roll scene, Joplin used the only medium that the "male-dominated counterculture" allowed to women in that circle—their sexuality.[120] While North American society has traditionally viewed tattooing as a sexual act or display, tattooed ladies half a century before Joplin's time, downplayed their shocking appearance with origin stories of victimization. In an ironic twist, Janis looked for excuses to showcase and discuss her tattoos as a means of feminine empowerment while still pandering to her audience as a sex object.

Though it remains unknown whether or not Joplin felt personally transformed or empowered by her tattoos, the impact made by her music, free-spirited display and untimely

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[117] Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis* (New York, New York: Villard Books, 1992), 282.

[118] Janis Joplin, *The Dick Cavett Show,* television, interview between Janis Joplin and Dick Cavett (1970; New York City: ABC, 2007) accessed November 11, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOTEDnQ4Fvk.

[119] David Ritz. *Rolling Stone Tattoo Nation: Portraits of Celebrity Body Art* (Boston, New York, London: Bulfinch Press, 2002), 58.

[120] Simon Reynolds and Joy Press. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 232, 273.

death certainly influenced other women during the time period. In a small section written in 1971 entitled, "The Joplin Cult," *The New York Times* captured a snapshot of Tuttle tattooing a female client with the same heart as the one he did on Janis Joplin. The caption notes that Tuttle claimed that more than 100 women have requested the same tattoo since Joplin's death.[121] In this way, female fans either absorbed Joplin's sexual attitude, perceived confidence and feminine rebellion, or at least tried it on for size, as a form "gender tourism."[122] Women did not have to completely reject their mainstream lifestyles or live the hard-partying and rough lifestyle of Janis Joplin in order to embody her freewheeling feminist mindset. They simply needed a small amount of cash, a design idea and a willing tattoo artist to make it happen.

A fascinating 1973 *New York Times* article aptly titled, "A Growing Number of Women Are Having Themselves Tattooed," emphasized the shift: "no Tugboat Annies, these, nor women who work for Barnum & Bailey. One tattooed woman is an attorney, another a banker, a third a writer and a fourth is the mother of three."[123] In the same article, Tuttle notes that his clients now "include doctors' wives, lawyers' wives, high school teachers, secretaries, nurses; stewardesses and a psychologist." The listing off of such professions and deliberate use of terms such as: embellish, Baroque and delicate, emphasize the normalcy of tattoos while recasting them as feminine. Aside from Tuttle's assertion that women acquire tattoos to "enhance their bodies," the article states that women themselves normalized tattooing by "circulating the idea

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[121] "A Joplin Cult?", *New York Times,* January 31, 1971.

[122] Simon Reynolds and Joy Press. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), xii.

[123] Special to the New York Times, "A Growing Number of Women Are Having Themselves Tattooed,"*New York Times*, March 4, 1973, accessed November 21, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/1973/03/04/archives/a-growing-number-of-women-are-having-themselves-tattooed.html.

—by word of mouth at first—that tattoos were fashionable."[124] In a more recent interview in *Inked Magazine*, an aging Tuttle attributed the normalization of tattoos to the Women's Liberation Movement and the exposure of tattooed celebrities such as Janis Joplin, Joan Baez and Cher. [125]

Like other countercultural lifestyle modes, tattoos did not instantly become socially acceptable by 1971—the passage of time allowed for that to occur organically. Undoubtedly, the celebrity influence of Janis Joplin served as a catalyst for women to acquire tattoos, and to even enter the business as artists. But just like the sordid world of rock and roll or even in the mainstream workforce, the tattoo industry presented obstacles put in place by the men who dominated it. This would require women artists to develop thick skin and a firm plan to navigate the 'glass ceiling' without compromising their standards. The few women who dared to try, catalyzed a previously unimaginable change in American culture.

She Refused to Sink: Women Artists and Reappropriation During the Tattoo Renaissance

During the 1970s, a small group of women artists decided to take the tattoo industry by storm and reclaim it for all women. Their stories take place in different areas of the country for a myriad of reasons. Vyvyn Lazonga, for example, set up shop in San Francisco, California and Seattle, Washington since the already existant tattoo culture presented opportunities to her. On the other hand, artists like Dot Brunson and Debbie Lenz established strongholds in Ohio with the help of their husbands and lax tattoo regulations in the state. After struggling in Michigan, an African American tattoo artist named Jacci Gresham fled to the South to establish her tattoo

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[124] Ibid.

[125] Marisa Kakolus, "Q & A with Lyle Tuttle.," *Inked Magazine,* September 2011, accessed November 21, 2016, http://www.needlesandsins.com/2014/10/flashback-lyle-tuttle-interview.html.

empire in New Orleans, Louisiana. Their stories, while similar in many ways, demonstrate the unique struggles and triumphs of each artist. Through bold experimentation, these women individually contributed to a larger revival in tattoo acquisition and transformation of the industry overall.

Vyvyn Lazonga, born Beverely Bean, blazed the trail as the first woman to own and operate her own tattoo shop without a male counterpart.[126] An artist since childhood, Vyvyn drew inspiration from a magazine that featured the colorful and ornate works of tattooist Cliff Raven.[127] Since men dominated the industry, and Painless Nell virtually anonymous outside of San Diego, Vyvyn managed to score the opportunity of a lifetime by apprenticing under Danny Danzl in Seattle, Washington.[128] After approaching him in 1972, Danzl taught her "everything he knew" and noted that she felt supported during the early years of her apprenticeship; "everyone thought it was so unique to have this young woman tattooing. But after that it was much harder."[129] The sexism of the tattoo industry became apparent once "she watched many less experienced men being groomed and promoted over her," while Danzl forced her to use a 'feminized' bedazzled machine that failed to perform adequately.[130] Paradoxically, while Danzl forced Lazonga to use a 'girly' machine in order to satisfy his ideal aesthetics of a female artist, Lazonga found herself unable to explore her own sense of feminine artistry since her male

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126 Margo DeMello. *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 177.

127 Margot Mifflin. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (3rd ed. New York: Powerhouse Books, 2013), 56.

128 Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion,* 57.

129 Ibid., 57.

130 Ibid., 57.

benefactor subordinated her vision with his own. In *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo,* Lazonga recounted her frustrations:

> There was sexism and prejudice and I resented it…I had to use faulty equipment and I just felt jealous. The springs on the machine broke every week and I wasn't allowed to change them [so] I wasn't able to do good work. It was a battle with Danny to get better technology, but eventually I did.[131]

In *Bodies of Subversion,* Lazonga also recalls the memory of one particularly crude client at Danzl's shop that leered at her and stated to his companions: "how'd you like to fuck a thing like that?"[132] Unable to escape such treatment, and to experiment with new techniques in order to grow as an artist, Lazonga left Danzl's shop. She opened her first shop, called Madame Lazonga's Dermagraphics, in 1979.

Life after Danny Danzl proved difficult though. Outside the relative safety of her shop, Lazonga remained subject to rampant misogyny, especially at tattoo conventions where she was often "snubbed" by male artists. [133] Despite this, Lazonga made a name for herself by shifting away from the 'cutesy' or 'girly' tattoos male artists assumed women wanted, and creating larger works of body art that featured flowers, birds and patterns that followed the natural curves of the female body. [134] Lazonga's employment of women-only artists changed the nature of the tattoo shop as well:

> I would hire women because it seems to work out better. We are able to share and communicate, we all kind of give-and-take, instead of trying to compete, which is really nice…The people that I hire are older and more experienced.

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[131] Ibid., 57.

[132] Ibid., 57.

[133] Ibid., 57.

[134] Margo DeMello. *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 177.

> They know how tough it is out there in the world of tattooing. We all kind of appreciate each other.[135]

In this way, not only did she create a shop that made female artists feel welcome and supported in their apprenticeships and as coworkers, Lazonga also made female clients feel comfortable to walk in and acquire a tattoo. In fact, even Lyle Tuttle noticed this shift in shop atmosphere when he stated: "Tattoo shops today are a lot kinder and gentler places than they used to be…the environment has changed. It's a pink world! And I think women in tattooing have been good for the industry." [136] Now with 44 years of experience under her belt, Vyvyn Lazonga still pushes boundaries to reshape the tattoo industry. Currently, she advocates for the tattooing of mastectomy scars as a means of empowerment and resignification for women afflicted with cancer.[137]

While all-female shops became increasingly popular due to Lazonga's influence in the West Coast, family shops provided a different atmosphere that dominated tattooing in the Midwest during the 1970s. In the Northside neighborhood of Cincinnati, Ohio, the red glow of a sign that reads "Tattoo Designs By Dana" graces the front of an aging structure that used to serve as a bank. Though Dana Brunson established the namesake shop and museum in 1971, pictures of his wife and son beam above a proud declaration on his website: "if you like my work,

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[135] Vyvyn Lazonga, interview with Beverly Yuen Thompson, Madame Lazonga's Tattoo, as quoted in Beverly Yuen Thompson, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 135.

[136] Marisa Kakolus, "Q & A with Lyle Tuttle.," *Inked Magazine,* September 2011, accessed November 21, 2016, http://www.needlesandsins.com/2014/10/flashback-lyle-tuttle-interview.html.

[137] Vyvyn Lazonga, "The Madame". Accessed November 5, 2016, http://www.madamelazongastattoo.com.

you'll like theirs."[138] His wife Dot, grew up fascinated by her father's Naval tattoo. She fondly recalls her first tattoo, a small rose on her behind, and her mother's reaction:

> I got my first tattoo, a bad tattoo, when I was18 and my mom didn't discover it until I was 22 [giggles]. She was extremely angry, because it just wasn't acceptable. She proceeded to tell me when she saw mine that "only bad girls got tattoos." And I said, "well it's not like that anymore. It's a different time." Eventually my mother did get a tattoo herself, when she was in her 60s.[139]

Dot's foray into the tattoo world occurred in 1971 at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina:

> When I married Dana, he went to Vietnam. When he came back, is when he actually learned to tattoo…so I was there at the base with him in Ft. Bragg and I would go with him to the tattoo shop while he was learning how…and in the year that he was apprenticing…women just didn't get tattooed back then. What made a difference and what I think started changing things, was the Hippie Movement. When Janis Joplin got tattooed she was very vocal about it. It suddenly became more popular for women to get cute little sexy tattoos in cute places…I actually didn't learn for quite a while, he had been tattooing quite a few years before I finally decided maybe I could do this? I started playing with the idea, and Dana was not very supportive or encouraging at first. He was like, "this is my thing! What do you want to do this for?" …It took him awhile to warm up. He taught me finally…And another friend of ours, Robert Benedetti who owned Sunset Strip tattoo, he used to come and hang out every summer for a month or so, now he was encouraging to me to learn to tattoo . He told Dana, "now you're missing a trick here. You should have your wife tattooing if she wants to tattoo, why don't you teach her?"[140]

Feeling gregarious and eager to remain on the right side of history, Dana burst into the interview space to humorously declare: "It was a man's thing. It was my thing," while assuring that he admires Dot's work.[141] Unlike Vyvyn Lazonga, Dot did not experience systematic sexism from clients and fellow artists. Likely, her association with Dana served as a deterrent for

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138 Dana Brunson, "Artists". Accessed November 5, 2016, http://www.danatattoo.com/artists.php.

139 Dot Brunson, interviewed by Noel Sucese, Cincinnati, November, 7, 2015.

140 Brunson, interview.

141 Ibid.

catcalls and rejection based on sex.[142] Interestingly enough, Dot criticized tattoo magazines for sexualizing women artists and contemporary artist Kat Von D. for using her sexuality to create a brand for herself rather than her talent as an artist.[143] In this way, Dot did not excuse Von D. for 'playing the game' and ultimately criticized her for perpetuating the stereotypes she and Vyvyn spent their entire careers fighting. Just like at Madame Lazonga's, the misogynistic rules of rock and roll get checked at the shop entrance in Ohio too. Similarly to Vyvyn, Dot crafted her own form of feminine tattoo art. In the safety of the family shop, and with eventual the support of her husband, she experimented with pastel colors, softer line work and watercolor style tattooing—a recent trend that has presented itself on Pinterest as 'new'.[144]

Four hours northeast of Designs By Dana in Youngstown, Ohio, another family owned shop inks clients of both sexes regularly. Lenz's Artistic Dermagraphics, while similar to Designs By Dana, contains an entirely different dynamic. Debbie Lenz, a witty sage with a flair for entertainment, unabashedly dominates the shop as its matriarch. Born in 1952 in Salem, Ohio, Debbie's father hoped she would be a boy, but she met him halfway as a tomboy instead.[145] Debbie remembered her uncle's sailor tattoo and her grandmother's reaction of disgust:

> My uncle had them, and I thought they were cool. But it wasn't really something that I thought I'd ever get done…We would be at family affairs…and he had a hula girl and a sailor girl on his forearms and we loved them… we'd be like "oh my God, Uncle Don show us your tattoos"…and I thought sailors got them, and bikers, not women… my grandmother would come in and see us looking at the tattoos and go "DONALD put those tattoos away!" and we were like "whoa

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142 Ibid..

143 Ibid.

144 Ibid.

145 Debbie Lenz, interviewed by Noel Sucese, Youngstown, October, 12, 2016.

> what was so bad about them?"…she did not like that he was showing them to the children.[146]

Lenz dabbled with art in high school and even had the encouragement of her art teacher to attend art school, however, her dreams of settling down to become a wife, mother and secretary took priority. In 1971, she married her high school sweetheart, but the marriage proved to be anything but sweet. Saddled with a mentally abusive alcoholic, much like her father, Debbie felt miserable as a 19 year old stay-at-home mother with her two children. One random night in 1977, a homeless man on the streets of Youngstown encouraged Debbie to approach and speak to a man with tattooed sleeves because she "seemed like a really interesting girl."[147] That tattooed man, John Lenz, not only eventually married her and taught her the art, he did her first two tattoos:

> I picked a butterfly and wanted it on my stomach so nobody could see it on me…I don't know why I chose a butterfly, it was what my friend had gotten years before. It wasn't anything too racy that's why I chose it… I wanted [the one on my shoulder] to be seen… I got a tattoo. I'm cool with it…it did kind of empowered me. It gave me some kind of strength.[148]

After a few years together, John eventually asked Debbie to help around the shop. She would draw designs, cut stencils and soldering needles.[149] After a few gap years due to struggles with confidence after many disastrous attempts, Debbie finally decided to hunker down and get serious about developing her talent with the needle in 1981. One of her earliest successful tattoos, actually ended up on her mother:

> She went through a wild stage…she was drinkin'… She said: "you can do a tattoo on me."…She ended up getting three tattoos…It was amazing. She trusted me…

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[146] Lenz, interview.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid.

> I think she really enjoyed it. The one with the skunk on the butt… she called me and was like "are you busy today? I wanna get a skunk on my butt" and I was like "really?" It was really cool. It brought my mom and I close. She accepted that I was tattooing and getting tattoos.

Like Debbie, her mother experienced the transformative power of tattoos. Later on in the interview, Debbie recalled another comically odd scene when she took breaks while tattooing to breastfeed her children or during her pregnancies. She assured one client, who expressed concern that she might go into labor at any moment: "If I do, you'll be the first to know!" Not all of Debbie's early experiences as an artist appeared as fulfilling as the one with her mother. Additionally, not all of her clients appreciated her gender and often underestimated her talents in their refusal to get "tattooed by a chick". Debbie recollects:

> I thought it was kinda funny. I was amused by it. At that point I was getting confident…I was gaining confidence that I could do this…pretty soon these guys started coming in and asking for me instead of John.[150]

As a family shop, Lenz's Artistic Dermagraphics employs Debbie's sons, but the shop's mood remains set by Debbie and her daughter Roxy, the shop manager. Similarly to Dot Brunson and Vyvyn Lazonga, Debbie's tattoos reflect a1970s feminine traditional style, loaded with feminine, brightly colored flowers. In contrast, Debbie has made a name for herself by reappropriating the bold lines of Golden Age tattooing and specializes in challenging cover-up designs.

Regrettably, African American women appear largely absent from the history of the Tattoo Renaissance, even in the present-day. However, Dot and Vyvyn noted that a history of women tattoo artists during the Tattoo Renaissance would remain grossly incomplete without a trip to the swampy Southern Delta. North Rampart Street's many historic hotels, business and residences reflect New Orleans' eclectic mix of cultures. Sandwiched between buildings with

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[150] Ibid.

ornate multi-level balconies and gas lanterns reminiscent of the Old World, sits a whimsical, wildly colorful and non-traditional building—Aart Accent Tattoos. Aart Accent remains the oldest and longest running tattoo shop in the state of Louisiana and its owner, Jacci Gresham, is the first African American woman in US history to own and operate her own professional tattoo shop.[151] Gresham was born in Flint, Michigan in 1946, where her father worked in an automobile factory and her mother earned meager wages as a seamstress.[152] Her first exposure to tattoos involved seeing them on customers that frequented the white bar located behind her childhood home.[153] Gresham loved drawing as a child eventually decided to attend Lawrence Tech for architecture. She left college before graduating to take up a lucrative drafting job in Detroit where she designed dealership showroom floor plans, and met Ajit "Ali" Singh.[154] The two became fast friends and eventually relocated to New Orleans together in search of work after getting laid off at General Motors in 1976.[155] Singh, who had learned to tattoo in England, discovered an ad in the paper; Jacci recalls:

> He had read an ad in the paper by Bill Poe from Shreveport […] he opened up a place, and he was looking for tattoo artists and was in this place called the Trading Post […] and Ali answered the ad, that's what happened. Now let me say this, when we relocated here there were three tattoo shops […] so there wasn't much competition.[156]

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[151] Jeanie Reis. "The Oldest Tattoo Shop in New Orleans," *Gambit,* May 5, 2014, accessed November 2, 2016, http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/a-life-of-ink/Content?oid=2430395.

[152] Jacci Gresham, interviewed by Noël Sucese, New Orleans, LA, November 24, 2017.

[153] Gresham, interview.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Ibid.

Only thirty years old and with no personal experience tattooing (both as an artist or client), Gresham abandoned her career as an architect and put her entire lifesavings into starting a tattoo shop with Singh.[157] Interestingly enough, Singh instituted the rule that Jacci, or any woman for that matter, could not tattoo in the shop. However, Jacci eventually used her investment as leverage to pressure Singh into teaching her to tattoo during a time when learning to do so meant challenging the rules surrounding her gender:

> I mean you didn't get into the business unless you had a boyfriend that was tattooing—that's the way it was […] When he taught me, lemme say this— I was scared to death, I so was afraid of making mistakes, you know what I mean? And then like I said, women didn't do this.[158]

Relocating to New Orleans proved to be a culture shock full of learning curves for Gresham. Fresh out of the Civil Rights Movement and still working through kinks with desegregation, Gresham noted that while New Orleans provided a friendly and progressive, atmosphere, "once you got away from New Orleans you *knew* it because you're in the South."[159] In her early experiences with customers, Gresham never experienced resistance from male clients because of her gender; in fact she claims the opposite:

> You know how men are, *pleas*e. [chuckles] My favorite line is […]pussy is pink, you know what I mean? I mean it's kind of vulgar, but it is what it is. Men don't care, when have they cared? So as long as you were a woman […] You'd have more problems with the women then you would the men. They were used to seeing men and uh I think you know, the way I was dressed, the whole bit. You know you're competing with someone's guy. Now you gotta keep in mind when you're talkin' about the people who came in here, they'd be people who were like convicted felons and stuff like that. It wasn't the people who get tattoos today. These were street people! They were more flexible, they were used to all kinds of people…more of a kind of integration […] I had more problems with the women than I did the men, and then when they found out they liked the tattoo

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[157] Ibid.

[158] Ibid.

[159] Ibid.

> that I was doing because I was adding more colors, I wasn't harassing the women, the women didn't have to take their blouses off to get their… you know… tattoo on their wrist—*that* helped me out.[160]

As the only African American and female tattoo artist in Louisiana at the time, and one of the few female tattoo artists in the country overall, Jacci yearned to connect with other artists like herself. The first tattoo convention she ever attended (Reno, Nevada 1978 or 1979) left Jacci stunned by the lack of professionalism; "It seemed to damn low class […] I was the pioneer in dressing like you had some sense, you know? I came from an office background!"[161] As a result, Gresham began dressing in vibrant and fashionable professional-wear to bring a sense of respectability from the architecture world into the tattoo industry. Though she met and bonded with white female tattoo artists such as Vyvyn Lazonga and Julie Moon, being a black female tattoo artist in the US proved isolating:

> Let me tell you this, a lot of people don't like the fact that there are black people in tattooing […]There's a lot of black female tattoo artists that are great but, it seems like this industry has segregated itself—to me. When I went to this thing here[162], there weren't one black person there but ME! And that's forty years later. Now what's wrong with this picture? […] Now black people are getting tattooed right? Since the '90s…maybe around '94-'95, black people really started getting tattooed, and so you get more black artists. But I do not understand why you go to conventions and don't see more black artists.[163]

Jacci Gresham has acted not only as a pioneer for women of color tattoo artists, but also as a steward of racial image and politics as well. She notes that African Americans, particularly in Louisiana, "have always gotten tattoos, but they're hand-stuck…I think the reason

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[160] Ibid.

[161] ibid

[162] Here Gresham is referring to the most recent American Professional Tattooer's Association event she attended in Las Vegas, Nevada. The organization honored her with a Pioneer in Tattooing Award.

[163] Ibid.

black people didn't get tattoos [professionally] was because the tattoo trade was predominantly a biker group, and they were not women-friendly or black people-friendly or any of that."[164] In addition to creating an environment that welcomed clients of color, Gresham experimented with inks, employed various techniques, and created new styles to better suit darker colored skin as a way of altering already established narratives about tattoos. Her first tattoo, an African arrow, served as inspiration for future portraits of Civil Rights Movement leaders such as Malcolm X. [165] In addition, she appropriated popular female cartoon characters such as Betty Boop reassigned their race in her tattoos.[166] Tattoos with such themes, Jacci believed, would ultimately empower their African American wearers in a significant way. She learned however, that using tattoos for racial uplift proved difficult when representations of black empowerment and culture changed as the decades wore on. In one revealing segment of the interview, Jacci recalls attempting to sell flash relating to black power and themes of racial pride in the 1990s:

> I was in a convention up in California and no one would buy it. It was more like a historical thing with all the Egyptian kind of stuff. But, the black flash that became popular was the gangster stuff, all of that rap stuff […] The tough guy, thug life […] When the gangster flash came out people, they loved it, but it was so degrading to me. I don't really care for it, I don't like doing drug related stuff—anything that's negative.

Interestingly enough, while Gresham remains selective in her choice of refusing to tattoo black clients with art that denigrates the black body rather than uplifting it, she has tattooed her fair share of racist symbology on Klansmen and bikers who frequented her shop during the 1970s

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[164] Ibid.

[165] *Color Outside the Lines: A Tattoo Documentary,* television, Jackie Gresham interview (2013; Artemus Jenkins and Miya Bailey) accessed November 2 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsmmjfI6cpM.

[166] Margot Mifflin. *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo* (3rd ed. New York: Powerhouse Books, 2013), 83.

and 1980s.[167] In doing so, she had hoped that crossing the color line in this way would encourage positive dialogue, change minds, and prove that she upholds the standards of a true professional tattoo artist.[168] For Gresham, picking her battles wisely proved essential while creating a space for herself in the tattoo industry during a time when that space simply did not exist.

Conclusion

Unlike the Victorian tattooed ladies who faded into obscurity, tattooed women and women artists of the Sixties and Seventies developed a permanence much like the ink that embedded their skin. They serve as wild ancestors for Millennial Generation women who comb the pages of Pinterest and Instagram in search of their next tattoo. The new sense of liberation women identified with, combined with the desire to express their true selves towards the late Sixties, stemmed from a subversive undercurrent beyond organizations such as NOW. Countercultural ideas of feminine rebellion seeped into the living rooms across the United States in a multitude of ways. One could find these ladies on television, or in a *Rolling Stone* magazine casually tossed on the coffee table. Even those who did not actively seek out visions of rock and roll's excess and degeneracy, still found rebellious attitudes enter their line of vision through innocuous articles in *The New York Times*.

Try as they might, men could not stop women from entering the tattoo industry or from reshaping it simultaneously. Although women still do not dominate the tattoo industry today, tattoo culture as a whole has changed in ways women like Janis Joplin, Vyvyn Lazonga, Dot Brunson, Debbie Lenz and Jacci Gresham could have ever anticipated. The need for additional

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[167] Ibid.

[168] Ibid.

research concerning race, class and other key women in the tattoo industry during the time period endures. Like the mainstream workforce, and society as a whole, the changes brought on by the Women's Liberation Movement forced the United States to shift its perception of women, as well as their agency concerning their identity and bodies as well. The contributions of tattooed women and women artists merely exemplify a more permanent, colorful view of that shift.

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